



# Trade Secrets

## A Life in and around Museums

Alice Parman







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# Pallas

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# Introduction

This memoir is intended primarily for people with an interest in museums. They might be people who love to visit museums; museum insiders, paid and volunteer; and those who are considering a job or a career in the field. By recounting pivotal experiences and describing how mentors influenced me, I aim to contribute to the history and ongoing evolution of museums as vital cultural institutions. Other readers might be friends and family members (some of whom have generously read and commented on drafts), students of women's social history in the U.S. during the decades 1940 to 2020, and others as yet unimagined.

It's a bold and perhaps reckless undertaking to distill the learning of nearly five decades in the field—to spill the beans to any interested reader. I take comfort in the certainty that most of these trade secrets are known, in some version or other, to hundreds or even thousands of museum colleagues, past and present. For the sake of credibility, I have not changed any names, though I have left some names unmentioned. To the best of my recollection, these accounts are true, though admittedly they are told from my perspective. I have verified some of my impressions or conclusions with a few colleagues. If others disagree, I expect to hear from them. Others in the museum field have no doubt experienced the same or similar events in quite different ways. I claim no authority, only “experience recollected [more or less] in tranquility.”

Henri Bergson theorized that humor is triggered when two unlike objects or ideas fuse in perception. Arthur Koestler proposed a similar explanation for creativity. Museums can be fertile ground for these flashes of comprehension, of ideational lightning strikes. For Freeman Tilden, interpretation is akin to revelation. For Alfred North Whitehead, *romance*—falling in love with a subject—is the necessary precursor to absorbing facts and details, a stage of learning he named *precision*. Where intention and imagination hold sway, museums can be places where transformative ideas awaken and take root, through contemplation, inspiration, and delight.

The world of museums has been a saving grace for me: an ensemble of institutions and people whose purposes and practices somehow transcend the daily grind, offering intangible, yet invaluable joys and rewards. I hope that my testimony in these pages will encourage some readers to explore the unique vocational and avocational opportunities that museums afford. Potential fringe benefits include avoidance of mistakes I've made, and caution from lessons learned through trial and error (mostly error). Along the way, I've recorded my perceptions of key moments in the evolution of the museum field in the past half century.

A newcomer to any field struggles to learn the insider scuttlebutt, the secrets of the trade. This learning is hard-won, because trade secrets can be as potentially embarrassing, and therefore as scrupulously undisclosed, as family secrets. You might find out a secret accidentally, by asking a rude or naive question. Or a secret-keeper might decide that you're old or experienced enough to be trusted with insider knowledge. Some secrets can be learned through happenstance...and some you may never learn. This is a big part of the aura of mystery that surrounds some fields: mortuary science, particle physics, archaeology...and museums.

Museums were just a small part of my childhood and teenage experiences. In the first draft of this memoir, I glossed over those formative years. A friend commented, "You had an unusual childhood that may have influenced your choice of a museum career." Viewed in that light, it seems important to reflect on the role my parents played in laying the groundwork for that choice. If you are a parent, I encourage you to think about what special lifelong gifts you might give your children. I am so grateful to my parents, George and Betsy Parman, for nurturing a yen in me for adventure and an openness to new experiences that have guided and inspired me for close to 80 years.

Front cover: The author with Professor Mel Aikens, University of Oregon Museum of Natural History, 1978. Back cover: Objects from the Paul H. Jensen Arctic Collection at the Museum of Natural and Cultural History.





The author playing on a roof, Washington Heights, Manhattan, 1943.

## I. A Sense of Wonder

How to evoke the life-changing revelation of my first behind-the-scenes tour of the Field Museum? Three decades' worth of museum visits, rewarding as they were, hadn't unlocked those doors for me—not even in my imagination. Before I walked in wonder through spacious storerooms packed with cultural and natural treasures, I simply had no idea that museums are more than what they display. Like a vast library of objects, multidisciplinary collections awaited inquiry, discovery, interpretation. With overwhelming clarity and palpable relief, I realized, "I could work *here*!"

A spirit of adventure had opened my heart to this awareness, bred and nurtured by my open-minded and adventurous parents. I was born at Fort Bragg in 1942 ("We may never see each other again, so let's have a baby.") As an infant, I slept in a series of dresser drawers; then Mother and I lived with my grandfather and aunt in New York City's Washington Heights neighborhood. I learned to walk in Fort Tryon Park, near the Cloisters, and played on the apartment roof, secured to a post by a rope. On to the home of my mother's parents in the Detroit suburbs, and a summer cottage in beautiful Pentwater, Michigan. Then with Dad, who *did* come home from the war, to New Jersey.

Memories of episodic travels and spells of settling down are impressionistic, for the most part. But a few recollections are as clear and fixed as photos in an album.

An Easter egg hunt in a Nutley, New Jersey, park with Alison (her name so like mine) and our mothers. Dad was home with adorable baby brother John. "Where is *your* daddy?" I asked Alison. "He died in the war," she replied. And my Daddy *didn't* die—this was the new idea that overwhelmed me.

Roller skating on the bumpy sidewalk along Crestwood Avenue in Nutley, in my tomboy jeans and striped t-shirt, concluding that I could skate as well as any boy, or better. Playing cowboy in my Hopalong Cassidy costume; I rejected the Dale Evans version,

because it had a skirt. Like every kid on the block, I packed toy six-guns; Mother forbade caps as too noisy, and cautioned us gunslingers to never point a gun at anyone, even a toy gun. Fewer rules prevailed in winter, when gender divisions emerged; boys and girls built separate snow forts, reinforced with sleds, and stockpiled snowballs for epic battles. Somehow, we never got frostbite.

From the time I was very small, my parents knew how to imagine the world through my eyes, appreciating whatever caught my attention, slowing down and accompanying me in my explorations of the world. Not only that, they took me and my brother to places that were wonder-full. And if I wondered about something, and asked questions about it, they were never too busy to stop and talk with me.

Our ordinary life on Crestwood Avenue was enlivened by trips to Manhattan to visit the Central Park Zoo or watch the Thanksgiving Day parade from atop Dad's shoulders. We walked along Fifth Avenue to gaze at ornately animated holiday window displays, and browsed for hours at F.A.O. Schwarz. While my brother and I scoured that magical store to settle on the one toy apiece we would be allowed to take home, our parents adjourned to the Plaza Hotel across the street for cocktails. On my sixth birthday, Mother took me and two friends to be guests on the Howdy Doody TV show. It was disillusioning to see the life-size puppet manipulated by a guy on a platform above the stage, and our swag was a measly tube of Colgate toothpaste apiece. But all that was forgotten once we ate supper at the Automat. Putting coins into slots and pulling out a plate of meatloaf or a piece of pie was a daring departure from the humdrum, akin to our family car, a Studebaker.

My earliest museum memory is from the American Museum of Natural History. Some of the same dioramas and dinosaur mounts may still be on view there, but the exhibit I remember must be long gone. It was a plastic model of a drop of pond water, magnified hundreds of times. Did its attraction mingle fascination with horror? It stared at me eerily, like the detached eye of a giant teddy bear. After Mother or Dad explained its meaning to me, I was

transfixed, and took a mental snapshot. The idea of magnification was novel, an exciting new way of seeing. At the same time, alarm bells sounded. So many living creatures in one drop of water! There must be a lot of them in a glassful!

Our house on Crestwood Avenue was small, with a coal furnace and a view of the New York skyline from the back window. Dad and Mother bought the house on the G.I. bill in 1947. The neighborhood was a mix of religions and occupations, but not coincidentally, everyone was white. One family had to move when the father went to jail for theft. When another family's house caught fire early one morning, the baby was trapped inside. The firefighter dad down the block, arriving home from work, ran into the house and saved the baby. I visited a kid across the street and was attacked by their German shepherd. Parents and kids who didn't speak English moved into another family's garage. I heard they were Latvian, whatever *that* was.

My grasp of geography was limited to Nutley and Manhattan, with a fuzzy idea of Norway. My paternal grandfather, who now lived with us, was Norwegian. In June 1949, I took my first ocean voyage with Mother, brother John, and Granddaddy George on the *MooreMacMail*, a freighter that carried a dozen passengers from New York harbor to Sweden. Dad had a consulting job in Singapore for six months; he proposed that the rest of the family spend a few months in Norway with our relatives, where he would join us. Mother got hold of a book called *Spoken Norwegian* and spent a lot of time studying. On shipboard, we ate with the crew. Mother played cribbage with the captain and often won. John, age two and a half, was never on deck without a harness and leash. Granddaddy and I hung out by the rail, gazing at the sea. After a chilly but relatively calm crossing, we arrived in Gothenberg. I believe our baggage was delivered to the Oslo train, but we had to walk to the station, and were nearly run down by a mob of cyclists; it must have been the end of the workday.

Relatives met us in Oslo. This was the first time my grandfather had seen his family since he left for America around 1905. From Oslo harbor we took a small boat to Nesodden, a peninsula southeast of

the city. The ferry dock was at Presteskjaer (priest's shore) below the Nesodden church. There more relatives met us with a horse and cart. They brought us uphill, along a dirt road, and through a beautiful allée of trees to the 19th century farmstead the extended Parmann family were renting. During the Nazi occupation, many of our cousins had lived off the land here during the summer months.

Mother's Iowa upbringing had prepared her for everyday realities: kerosene lamps, water from a well, chamber pots and an outhouse, milk from the cow in the barn, laundry washed in the pond. Perhaps in response to letters, our parents knew what Norwegians needed after four years of Nazi pillaging: sheets, towels, nylon stockings and other scarce consumer items made up the bulk of our baggage. All the women knitted constantly and rapidly, producing socks and sweaters as if by magic. The front parlor was an Aladdin's cave of old-fashioned children's magazines (in Norwegian) and 1930s issues of *Punch* (in English!). At night, the grownups listened to the news in the parlor (was the radio battery-powered?), while the kids played games. I learned Norwegian, quickly and effortlessly. Twenty people sat down for every meal; we kids ran wild. No other living arrangement has ever come close, in my experience. It was paradise, even for the adults.

The weather turned cold and rainy in September, so we moved to town. Soon after Dad joined us, we left for Paris, where I celebrated my seventh birthday in a sidewalk cafe. John and I sailed boats and watched a puppet show in the Luxembourg Gardens, and the whole family went to an indoor circus. At the Louvre, I saw the Winged Victory for the first time. After a nasty Channel crossing, we drove through endless streets of bombed-out ruins in London, in the autumn of 1949; seeing the aftermath of war, I understood better what Dad (as an Army photo-interpreter stationed in London) had somehow survived. Dad's wartime friends the Parkers welcomed us to their home in the suburbs. No central heating, just an electric fire. I had never been so cold. Mother admonished us for complaining; this is what life is like here, she explained.

We flew home in a Pan American prop plane, Gatwick to Shannon to Gander to Idlewild (now JFK). John and I slept in berths while

our parents napped in their seats. It was five in the morning when they woke us up for the refuel at Gander. Dad bought us ice cream cones! Before long we were back in Nutley, where I entered second grade two months late.



With my brother John in Nutley, New Jersey

As brother John Parman said in his eulogy for our father, "By the time I was six, I had been around the world. I sometimes have the feeling that I've lived my life backwards." Ditto—by age 10 I had crossed several oceans in big ships, and had lived for three years in the small, as yet undeveloped British colony of Singapore. For years I held it against my parents that they asked me, "How would you feel about moving to Singapore?" They might as well have asked how I felt about moving to Mars. And what could I say: "You go, I'll stay"? The month-long ocean voyage from San Francisco via Honolulu, Tokyo, Kobe, Hong Kong, and Manila was packed with new experiences (ping pong, canasta, onshore excursions). First impression of Singapore: many men and boys wore fezes, as did our driver, Arip. Did this mean that children could drive? Like all colonials, we had servants to cook, clean, and do the gardening.

School would start soon, and I would wear a uniform and sing *God Save the King*. The weather was hot and humid, with a solid month of rain in January. The garden was full of snakes and lizards, and the house had no screens; every room had a pair of geckoes, and we slept under mosquito nets. We had to put on slippers if we got up at night, for fear of stepping on poisonous nocturnal centipedes. Giant spiders showed up in the house from time to time, as did flying cockroaches the size of sparrows.

It was all very diverting, but to my dismay I realized we had moved to suburbia. There weren't many kids in the neighborhood and there was no way to meet up spontaneously. Everything had to be arranged. School was only half a day (because of the heat), and I rarely saw my classmates outside of school. Swimming and riding lessons kept us busy, along with family outings to the Raffles Museum (a Victorian cabinet of curiosities), the Botanic Garden (a fabulous jungle), and Aw Boon Haw Gardens (a pleasure spot filled with statuary). But for the first time in my life, I was homesick—for my block and all the kids I used to play with. I could feel my memories slipping away; for months after our arrival, I would mentally walk up and down Crestwood Avenue, reminding myself who lived in each house. When the Sears catalog arrived in the mail twice a year, I devoured it, keeping myself current on America.

I was becoming British. I learned so much under the British system, even in a tiny school staffed by army officers' wives, that when I returned to 6th grade to the U.S. I learned nothing new, except U.S. history and geography, until 9th grade. I knew how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide pounds, shillings, and pence, but couldn't make change in American money. I could recite a list of the kings of England, do mental arithmetic, speak a little French (and a little Malay), swim like a fish, canter and jump on a pony; but I had no idea of the rules of baseball, or how to play the game. If I had never gone to Singapore, would I have learned to do a cartwheel? or blow a bubble gum bubble? If I hadn't worn the same school uniform for three years, would I have developed some fashion sense? On the other hand, how would my life and outlook have been different if I hadn't spent ages 7 through 10 in a place where I was decidedly in the minority? I lived an exaggeratedly privileged life,

but it was evident that most people in Singapore were not white, or Christian, or English-speaking.

I found out later that my parents always kept a bag packed, ready to leave in a hurry if need be. We were awakened one night to be told an American family would be staying with us. The kids crawled in next to us under our mosquito nets. In the morning we learned that rebels had taken over their oil company town in Sumatra, and they would be headed back home soon. Our time in Singapore coincided with the Korean war, while the British faced a Communist China-led insurgency in the Malayan upcountry. Buses were bombed from time to time in Singapore. When we drove to a hill resort near Kuala Lumpur for a holiday with friends, the men carried pistols; in case of an ambush, we were told to lie down on the floor of the back seat. Our parents took care not to impose their fears. A spirit of adventure, they felt, demands a willingness to live with risk. They weren't careless of our safety, but taught us to be brave rather than fearful. After all, they'd lived through a World War not long before.

When Mother, John, and I flew back from Kuala Lumpur after the holiday at the hill station, our DC-3 flew through a lightning storm. The plane was all over the sky; lightning bolts flew all around us. The passengers were screaming, vomiting, and actually turning green. Mother clasped our hands and smiled. "Isn't this fun?" she said. "It's like riding a bucking bronco!" We made it, and I learned a life lesson that has helped me weather some tough times.

Tanglin Preparatory School prepared its students for the 11-plus exams that sorted British children into vocational and university-bound tracks. Neither option could be pursued in Singapore at that time. Soon, my friend Rosemary Clement was shipped off to prestigious Wycombe Abbey, while the Phipps sisters, Priscilla and Joanna, went back to England with their parents. Some Americans in Singapore sent their kids to boarding schools in the States, but Mother and Dad decided against this. Early in 1953, they booked passage for us to London. Saying goodbye to Ginger, a stray dog we raised from puppyhood, was wrenching. According to our parents, dogs from the tropics wouldn't survive if transplanted to the U.S. At least he would be safe with his new family.

We sailed to London on the S.S. Chusan, the newest member of the Peninsular & Oriental (P&O) passenger ship fleet. Ports of call: Penang, Colombo, Bombay, and Aden. In Colombo we toured the city by taxi and watched elephants help a road-building crew by uprooting trees. In Bombay, Dad's Indian colleagues invited us to supper at their swimming club. In Aden, I rode on a camel, witnessed poverty such as I had never seen, and experienced real thirst for the first time. The Suez Canal was lined with British troops; one called out, "Put all the women ashore!" At Port Said we were confined to our cabins with strict orders not to even look out through the portholes.

During the voyage there were fancy dress parties for children and adults. I learned "The Owl and the Pussycat" by heart, and recited it as part of a talent show. Dad borrowed John's Meccano set (the British version of an Erector set) to make a hat like a ship's bridge. He hand-colored miniature signal flags to fly the message "I require a pilot." The ship had an outdoor pool, an old-fashioned fitness room with a mechanical saddle, a library, and a deck tennis court.

As we sailed northwest across the Mediterranean Sea, the weather grew colder. As we passed Malta, a fellow passenger asked me, "Do you know why we're not stopping at Malta?" No, why? "Because that would make the Maltese cross." On a rainy, windy day, I was on deck with some playmates, wearing my new (and unfamiliar) winter coat. We spun in circles till we were dizzy, then fell down to recover and start again. A voice came over the loudspeaker: Stalin was dead. We danced for joy.

As we passed through the straits of Gibraltar, I didn't feel well. Dad insisted that I walk eight times around the deck with him--a mile. I faltered, but he made me finish. Not long after, I was feverish. I had the measles and was immediately quarantined. My parents could visit—they had both had the measles—and the ship's doctor checked on me. Of course, I reveled in making my father feel guilty about the mandatory mile! In a few days we entered the Thames estuary, where a dense fog brought all navigation to a halt. The Chusan was at anchor, and a warning bell directly over my cabin rang incessantly. Ding, ding, ding, day and night. I still had spots,

and the doctor told my parents I would have to be quarantined on shore. Looking out the porthole, I could see Tilbury Hospital, a terrifyingly Dickensian building. No thanks, and my parents agreed. But the customs officer, who seemed pleased to enforce the rules, was adamant that only if a U.K. citizen took us into his own home would I be exempt from hospitalization. Dad telephoned his wartime friend Bill Parker in Ruislip, a London suburb. Bill was painting his living room, but dropped everything and drove to the docks to pick us up. Mother and I stayed with the Parkers until the quarantine was over, then joined Dad and John at a London hotel.

We then embarked on a six-month tour of several European countries, one of the most enriching and memorable experiences of my life. In 1953, postwar Europe was just opening up to travelers. In a bold move, our parents bought a British car, a Vauxhall; they also acquired a remarkable guidebook by Temple Fielding, along with road maps of each country we visited. Just as important were English-language books and comics, purchased in England to keep John and me occupied in the back seat. In those days, it was safe for Mother and Dad to leave us in the car while they toured a museum or a cathedral. With very few exceptions, they didn't force us to trek through cultural sites best appreciated by teens and adults. (I recall that Dad insisted we see Rembrandt's "The Night Watch" in Amsterdam, but I didn't see what the fuss was about.) Instead, they sought out places that they knew we would appreciate. They took the time to imagine how to see the world through our eyes, and enjoyed that sense of wonder right along with us. Touring Paris in a bateau mouche, exploring all four stories of the incredible Franz Carl Weber toy store in Zurich, throwing snowballs in the Swiss Alps, learning about the prisoner of Chillon at Montreux, riding a paddle boat at Lake Como, striding through the miniature city of Madurodam near The Hague, mini-golf and Dutch ice cream in a resort town near the North Sea, playing kings and queens in a ruined castle in Luxembourg, watching lace makers in Bruges and climbing the nearby Waterloo Monument, braving the kids' roller coaster and smashing dinner plates at Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen. And always new languages, different kinds of hotels (and bathrooms!), new tastes in food and drink—even Disney comics in French and Danish.

Returning to Norway to see our relatives in Oslo, Bergen, and Stavanger, I was dismayed to find that I could no longer speak Norwegian. The adults all spoke English, but not the children. Cousins I'd once played with became strangers. A day with Brit and Dagny at their school in Oslo was so lonely; only the teachers could talk with me. As we headed back to Scotland and then England, preparing to sell the Vauxhall and sail to New York on the *Queen Elizabeth*, I wondered what would come next. We were going back to Nutley, but not in the same neighborhood. I'd go to a different school. What would it be like to be home? To be American?

There was so much to learn! I was the new kid in two successive schools, shedding my British accent overnight and falling in love with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Our family ended up in a leafy North Jersey suburb, Mountain Lakes. The modernist house our parents built contrasted with the 1920s craftsman mansions where some of my friends lived. The town was a lovely setting for my fairly conventional teenage years. As often as possible, my friends and I escaped to New York. A bus on the corner took us to the Port Authority terminal at 8th Avenue and 42nd Street. We explored the fancy stores on 5th Avenue, and were once asked to leave Bonwit Teller because we looked too scruffy in our trench coats and dirty white sneakers. But the museum guards didn't care how we were dressed, and we memorized the contents of MOMA and the Met.

School field trips took us to the American Museum of Natural History, the U.N., the Metropolitan Opera, and The New York Times (where I got indelible printers' ink on my coat). We made memorable church youth group outings to places of worship (a Russian Orthodox service and a Buddhist temple) and to Madison Square Garden for Billy Graham's Crusade for Christ. With friends, I went to the Apollo Theater to see Ray Charles, where three white girls in the front row briefly caught the attention of the Raelettes before they launched into a terrific show. Serendipitous encounters led me to performances by Martha Graham's dance company (at Carnegie Hall) and Louis Armstrong (at the Roxy). I saw Rex Harrison in *My Fair Lady*, Richard Burton in *Camelot*, Carol Burnett in *Once Upon a Mattress*, Judy Holliday in *Bells Are Ringing*, as well as off-Broadway shows: Genet's *The Blacks*,

Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and Albee's *The Zoo Story*.

A high school friend who graduated ahead of me invited me for a weekend at the University of Rochester. I came home and announced I would apply "early decision." A good choice, for the most part, that enabled me to spend an academic year in Paris. I lived with a family, rarely spoke English, and became fluent in French. An intensive language course at the Sorbonne prepared students from every continent to teach French in our home countries. Classes met for six hours each weekday, with almost no homework, with evenings open to explore the city's museums, historic districts, theaters, and concert venues. The Louvre was free on Thursday afternoons, so I visited each week, spending an hour in a new-to-me gallery. I skipped over the Poussins, judging them stilted and over-dramatic. A few months later, our language program offered a series of talks on 17th century French painting by a professor at the Sorbonne. His exposition of Poussin opened my eyes; I returned to the gallery many times, and ever since, Poussin has been my favorite painter.

At Rochester I met my first husband, Jack Carnes, and we married a year after graduation. We both earned masters' degrees in teaching at Harvard. I taught French in three different high schools before deciding classroom teaching wasn't for me. Long commutes, multiple preparations, and the need to put on a circus to get kids interested in French took their toll. On the plus side, I learned to facilitate order and learning in a room full of students just a few years younger than myself--a skill that would come in handy later.

We moved to Chicago, where Jack pursued a Ph.D. at the School of Education. I decided to apply too, successfully courted by a new Ph.D. program in teacher education, studying how teachers are trained, with a view to improving that process--a noble idea, but the program was so applied and interdisciplinary that it lacked foundational content. And this was the late 1960s, in Chicago. The city and the nation were on fire with resistance, revolt, insurrection. Change and experimentation were in the air. Protests and uprisings alternated with assassinations. Living in racially mixed Hyde Park,

for the first time in my life I was called "honky" and worse—not by neighbors, but by strangers. This seemed to me a daring act of courage by people who had probably suffered a lifetime of abuse, verbal and otherwise. It was on me to adjust.

During the four years I spent at the university, I had many opportunities to observe faculty life up close. After completing my undistinguished but qualifying dissertation, I began thinking seriously about life after my fellowship years. It was clear to me that despite all the courses I'd taken, I had very little to "teach." The thought of preparing lectures was daunting. Whatever I was supposed to teach, I'd have to start from scratch. If I landed a tenure track position, I'd have to figure out how to publish. If I found something in the administrative or programmatic line, I would be vulnerable to budget cuts and forced to fundraise endlessly. Most of all, as much as I'd succeeded as a student, I felt unsuited to academic life. After taking my doctoral exams, I told myself I'd never give or take another exam. That was a vow I would not be able to fulfill as a professor. I felt sure that academia was not for me. But what else could I do?



## FIELD BRIEFS

Carnes New Education Chairman



Dr. Alice Carnes, who joined the Museum's Department of Education in 1972 as coordinator of teacher training, has been appointed chairman of the department, for which she was serving as acting chairman for the past several months. Before coming to the Museum, Dr. Carnes was acting director for the Master of Arts in Teaching program of the University of Chicago, where she obtained her PhD. She received a BA degree in foreign and comparative literature from the University of Rochester in 1964, and her Master of Arts in Teaching from Harvard University the following year. Dr. Carnes, with her husband and daughter, lives on Chicago's north side. (Photo: John Bayalis)

## 2. What Makes a Museum Great?

One day a fellow grad student handed me a help wanted ad she'd clipped from the *Sun-Times*. The Field Museum was looking for a director of education. I inquired, and soon received an invitation to come in for an interview. The short, fit man who interviewed me was the assistant director. I had trouble guessing his age, figuring he had to be considerably older than my twenty-nine years because of his grey hair. His informal manner and natural courtesy did more than put me at ease—they made me feel special. I would come to know Bob Inger well during my six years at the Field. Bob was internationally known in herpetology circles; at the time of our first encounter, I couldn't have defined the word herpetology if my life depended on it.

After a brief interview in his office, he toured me through a series of storerooms: anthropology, insects, mammals, birds, and of course, herpetology (reptiles and amphibians). My first glimpse of a museum's innards was a revelation. I had no idea that museums had way more objects in storage (about 98 percent) than on exhibit (two or three percent). Much later, I thought of a helpful analogy: there are a lot more clothes in my closet than I can wear at any one time. I also learned that exhibits are only one way of using the collections. Research at the Field Museum required systematic collections of, e.g., multiple specimens of the same type of artifact or organism. And the preservation of cultural objects and natural specimens was also an important reason for collecting things that might never be displayed—a justification for some collections that has been widely and sometimes successfully challenged in recent years.

Imagine a room the size of a church, lined with tall, glassed-in cabinets and open shelves laden with baskets, tools, clothing, weapons, musical instruments, etc., from all over the world. In the empty spaces between the storage units, long tables held assemblages of artifacts, laid out for study, cataloging, or exhibit preparation. In another warren of rooms were close-packed cabinets whose large, shallow drawers housed ranks of insects mounted on pins. Miraculous butterflies, tiny mites, giant dung beetles, even

gold bugs. The unmistakable aroma of mothballs permeated suites of rooms devoted to birds and mammals. A few mounted specimens were on show, but to my surprise the drawers and shelves were full of skins and bones. In herpetology and its neighbor, fishes (ichthyology), the smell of formaldehyde predominated; undaunted, staff and volunteers played pinochle in one corner. Among them was Hy Marx, Bob's successor as herpetology curator. I learned later that Hy was a high school graduate who had apprenticed to a previous curator. In those days, knowledge trumped credentials in this remarkable institution.

Bob introduced me to staff members in charge of school group visits, public lectures, a traveling exhibit service, audiovisual services, and a nascent volunteer program. These busy people worked on their own, in offices scattered throughout the multistory building. Bob was looking for someone to unify these programs into a single department of education. He was very encouraging about my chances of becoming that person.

Stunned by so many unfamiliar impressions, my overriding thought was "I could work in a treasure house like this!" But then I considered what Bob had told me about the new hire's responsibility: to create and manage a 25-person education department with a \$350,000 budget. Although my resume said I was the assistant director of a master's program at my university, in truth I had never managed anything. Even if I had, this job was too big for the new mom of a baby girl. Regrettfully, I asked Bob to set aside my application. He seemed genuinely disappointed.

Putting the finishing touches on my dissertation, I had a low-key administrative position in the School of Education, and had found a wonderful lady in the neighborhood who cared for our daughter in her home, along with several other children. The administrative job had a termination date. I had no choice but to continue my dispiriting search for the teaching position I didn't want. But a few months later, the man who'd taken the Field Museum job I'd turned down invited me to lunch.

That was another revelation: the city's Park District operated a hole-in-the-wall café at the north end of Soldier Field, across the street from the Field Museum. A favorite hangout of museum staff, the café's courtyard featured enough trees and bushes to draw a steady stream of migrating birds from the flyway along the lakefront.

A long meal ensued, punctuated by questions from the new hire. As we approached the two-hour mark, I thought: "If he asks me one more thing, I'm going to start the meter running." His next question was "Would you like a job?" He had found a grant award letter in a drawer, abandoned by a predecessor. A call to the National Science Foundation revived the project: to help teachers use the Field Museum more effectively. It would mean a two-year commitment; there was money for materials, an assistant, a conference or two, and the princely salary (for those days) of \$16,000 a year. I accepted on the spot.

What a perfect way to get to know a workplace--as a colleague, I was no one special, just part of the gang. With an excellent assistant—a Northwestern University professor's wife with a master's degree in natural sciences—I began planning ways to attract and engage teachers at all levels with the bountiful resources in the museum's exhibit halls. Nan and I visited with all the curators and toured exhibits and collections with them. In the museum's cafeteria, we enjoyed early morning kaffeklatsches and lunchtime sessions with an interdisciplinary assortment of staff members. The museum's educators and docents, who had guided school groups through the exhibits for many years, had insights and experience to share. We spent a morning watching the museum's taxidermist mount a specimen. With amazing artistry, he transformed skin and bones into a lifelike bird, ready to fly. We learned not to gag when a large dead animal was boiled down in the fourth-floor rendering vat, and consequently appreciated the work of dermestid beetles that, in another corner of the museum, soundlessly stripped smaller corpses of their flesh. Apparently, a steady stream of roadkill, dead zoo animals, and other donations continually added to the museum's zoological collections.



Carolyn Blackmon, my mentor and friend at the Field.

Nan and I shared a tiny, windowless third-floor office with the inestimable Carolyn Blackmon. Recently promoted from volunteer to staff status, she was the museum's volunteer coordinator. She had also been asked to inventory and make sense of its scattered audio-visual resources, including historic lantern slides that regularly showed up on the museum's loading dock with the outgoing trash. These fragile photographs on glass preserved the visual record of early museum expeditions to Tibet and other far-flung destinations. Saving the lantern slides from oblivion, and finding ways to make them accessible to scholars, were important goals for Carolyn.

As I got to know her better, I learned that Carolyn didn't have a college degree, was married to an executive at the Caterpillar Corporation, was the mother of four nearly grown children, had been a Junior Leaguer in her native Peoria, and spent every Sunday morning with Bob Inger at a nature preserve south of Chicago, camera in hand. She knew and had ready access to everyone at the museum, from the director on down. She had an extraordinary combination of intelligence, tact, conviction, and good humor. She became my mentor and friend.

When I left some years later to become director of the natural history museum in far-off Eugene, Oregon, there was no doubt who my successor would be. Within a couple of years, Carolyn became famous in museum circles for inventing collaborative exhibit planning (curator, educator, exhibit designer) and securing a Kellogg Foundation grant to share that brilliant idea with others.

A colleague informed me early on that the Field was one of the world's four great natural history museums, along with the Smithsonian, American, and British Museums of Natural History. I believe this was based on the size and diversity of their collections. The Field's mission statement in the 1970s described its scope as "the Earth and our near neighbors." Planetary geology, I learned, includes the study of meteorites, hence "near neighbors." At the nearer end of the cosmic scale was malacology--the study of mollusks. My vocabulary grew: taxonomy, type specimen, accession, artifact, specimen, deaccession, installation, provenience, registrar, collections manager, dermestid beetles, taxidermy mount, field work, herbarium, proposal, donor, annual report, lantern slide....

The museum paid for some of us to attend regional and national conferences, conduits of information and friendship, and sometimes hotbeds of change. For museums were changing, slowly but seismically, in the 1970s. Leadership and scholarship, overwhelmingly white and male, gradually opened to a mostly female sector of "museum educators," and to newly minted women Ph.Ds in the sciences. People of color first became security guards, custodians, and secretaries. Then the Field hired J. L. Djalal Williams, a Black scholar and artist, to plan and teach programs on African arts and culture for youth and adults. John White, Cherokee, a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago, brought forthright Native perspectives, knowledge, and advocacy.

I was promoted to Education Department Chair in 1973, the Field's first woman manager. Although I'd never managed anything, I was now responsible for 25 employees and a \$350,000 budget. My bosses wanted me to succeed; they sent me to seminars, held my hand, and guided me. But I owe even more to Carolyn and to Alice Lewis.

Carolyn was a steadfast source of wisdom and good sense. Her foresight and kindness guided me through five years of on-the-job learning. Alice Lewis, the museum's first Black department secretary, came from a temp agency and was so exceptional that several departments competed to hire her. Unlike me, she understood budgets and bookkeeping. Every department kept its own set of unofficial accounts, because reports from faraway Accounting were so untimely and impenetrable as to be useless.

Carolyn and Alice were my eyes and ears, alerting me to potential problems and helping me deal with troublesome situations. Carolyn was usually the first to spot a problem, and had already thought of a way to handle it. When 500 copies of a booklet promoting "Volunteer Opportunities" (did *you* spot the typo?) arrived from the printer, Carolyn recommended we go ahead with distribution, while redoubling our proofreading efforts.

Not everyone in charge of operations at the Field was so competent. Word had it that the personnel director owed his job at the Field to a trustee's request after he was fired by his employer. "Never discuss personnel issues with him!" I was warned: anything juicy would go straight to the higher-ups. It was also clear that the head of security saw our throngs of visiting school children as his lowest priority. After conferring with some friendly guards, we educators stopped compensating for his mistakes, and he shaped up in short order.

There was a shadow "government" within the museum, an informal network of people committed to the welfare of the institution and determined to stick together. We saw each other at morning coffee, often ate lunch together, and increasingly worked side-by-side on museum-wide projects. We were an interdisciplinary group drawn together as much by sociability as by our interest in ideas. When I asked about the meaning of masks, the curator of anthropology Dr. Bennett "Ben" Bronson obliged with a succinct, memorable explanation: to put on a mask is to become *somebody else*. It was the curator of botany who changed my experience of Chicago winters when she recommended that I buy a minus-40-below parka.

At the breakfast and lunch table, I picked up hints about who to trust, who not to count on, and what might be coming down the pike. As a newcomer, I was aware that big changes were happening at the Field. But I learned only gradually how far the museum had come in recent years, and why. For almost 50 years, Stanley Field had ruled the museum as his personal domain, laying down the rules, and making up any deficits out of his own funds. Not long before I started at the museum, all employees still lined up at a window on Friday afternoons to receive their week's pay in cash!

Someone persuaded this scion of the department-store Fields to recruit and train the man who would become the museum's first-ever professional director: E. Leland "Lee" Webber. A Navy veteran and an accountant by training, Lee started in the Field's mailroom and rotated through every operational position.

A North Shore product, Webber was friendly with the Armours, the Swifts, and other magnates who made up not only the Board of Trustees, but also the quietly influential Women's Board (still in existence as of this writing). As it turned out, he proved to be the right person to lead the Field through the financially perilous 1960s and 1970s. As runaway inflation drove up salary levels and prices, endowments fell alarmingly short of operating costs. The long sleep of museums, with their frozen-in-time displays and hit-and-miss visitation, was over. Corporate support, often inseparable from personal philanthropy, became essential for the museum's survival. With fellow directors from other Chicago museums, Webber cut an extraordinary deal with the Park District: substantial city funding, in exchange for services to a broad public. The Field Museum now offered free admission to thousands of school children, a weekly free Friday with extended hours, and greatly expanded exhibit and education programs.

Along with our newly unified education department, established units including marketing, public relations, and development gained funding, staff, and decision-making power. Increased public programming, major in-house exhibits titled *African Arts* and *Man in His Environment*, and blockbusters such as *Treasures of Tutankhamun* were the new order of the day.

Something even bigger was happening. Long before the museum announced its \$25 million campaign to renovate and upgrade our creaky old building, we kaffeklatschers knew something was afoot. It was no secret that structural problems were rife. Public and staff restrooms were well-preserved examples of state-of-the-art 1920s sanitary decor. Rats and (giant) cockroaches could be sighted in the basement. Lack of air conditioning sometimes forced staff to leave work early, when temperatures on the upper floors hit 90 degrees. The rickety staff elevator was said to have caused a death; it lacked a safety feature that would have prevented the unfortunate victim from stepping through a doorway and falling five stories.

Behind the closed doors of the "Director's Dining Room," a quaint holdover from the Stanley Field era, higher-ups and board members gave active consideration to new construction and a move to the suburbs. Only faint echoes of the debate could be heard by us lower-downs. But the upshot was a bold decision to remain in inner city Chicago, and to bring the 50-year-old museum building up to 1970s standards. And by the way, the museum would not close; we would remain open to the public throughout. For most museum staff, and especially for the education and exhibits departments, the renovation was comparable to throwing a party every night in the course of a kitchen remodel. Parking was near-impossible for visitors and staff alike, as construction companies and workers commandeered their territories. Tour leaders, teachers, and field trip chaperones struggled to be heard above incessant jackhammering. Visitors routinely encountered dead-end exhibit hall closures, impossible to predict or control. Enormous collections (including about a million anthropological artifacts) had to be moved and re-shelved, some more than once.

As stressful as it was, the renovation noticeably spiffed up the museum. There were kinks to iron out, and mistakes to be corrected, but we all felt proud of our transformation from dowdy to gracious. The building's palatial architecture showed off nicely, with new paint and cleaned-up stone. Stanley Field Hall, one of the nation's largest and grandest indoor spaces, came into its own as landmark and anchor, intuitively guiding visitors in, out of, and through 15 acres of exhibits.

The education department, lodged in scattered offices on several floors, was unified in a deluxe suite. It was in the basement level, but it had windows all along one wall. All the furniture was new, and I was able to score a gorgeous roll-top desk and matching chair that someone else was evidently delighted to get rid of. Predictably, we all had to get used to being neighbors as well as colleagues, and it wasn't always easy. The department's glass-fronted door was one of the few staff offices visible (and therefore accessible) to members of the public. We were easy to find, and sometimes functioned as the complaint department. As in, "I flew in from Dallas just to see King Tut, I only have one day, and tickets are sold out!"

For we were just beginning to settle into new quarters while recovering from the ordeals of the building renovation, when we learned that the Field Museum would be a host site for *Treasures of Tutankhamun*. One of a handful of blockbuster exhibits that actually lived up to its hype, *Tut* featured dozens of the Cairo Museum's most precious artifacts, including the spectacularly beautiful mask of the young pharaoh. We knew the exhibit would draw unprecedented crowds, and that it would test the stamina, ingenuity, and dedication of every department and staff member.

It was common knowledge that *Treasures of Tutankhamun* nearly brought Washington's National Gallery to its knees, because of sheer numbers of visitors in unmanageable lines. But Carolyn Blackmon and operations head Gus Noren saved our bacon. During their scouting expedition to D.C. in anticipation of the exhibit's showing at the Field, Gus and Carolyn took a break to visit the White House. Tours of the Presidential mansion were free, but visitors had to obtain a timed ticket in advance. Instead of queuing for hours to get in, they could visit other attractions, then show up at the appointed hour and walk in. Reasoning that this system would work equally well at a museum, Carolyn and Gus designed a timed admission setup with a daily limit of 10,000 visitors. Long lines still formed, but once people got their tickets, they left to go shopping or have lunch. The morning line for King Tut tickets became a regular feature of morning traffic reports. People even met their future spouses while waiting on line. But there were few complaints. It was a good system; other museums on the exhibit tour adopted it.

I have no idea what administrative genius hired Harvey Mathew to be the Field Museum's project manager for the King Tut exhibit. All I ever learned about Harvey's background was that he had once managed a sausage factory. He was perfect for the job. He first met with each department head to develop a task list and timeline. After our initial meeting, I put all that out of my mind and went back to more pressing concerns, figuring it was all up to Harvey now—thank God for Harvey. About six weeks later he asked to meet with me. He showed up with the task list and went through it item by item to check on completions. Of course, nothing had been done, because I had not followed up (and I was not alone).

Fortunately, there was still time; we all kicked into high gear and when the exhibit arrived, we were as ready as one can be when plunging for the first time into something unprecedented. In a museum's life cycle, a successful blockbuster exhibit resembles St-Exupéry's drawing in *The Little Prince* of the snake that swallowed an elephant. At the Field Museum, our staff size doubled, from 350 to 700. There were lots of new names to learn and faces to know, most of them newcomers to museum workplace culture. Our department was responsible for recruiting, training, and supervising hundreds of volunteers. We had to beat them off with a stick! Everyone wanted to volunteer. It soon became apparent that a tiny but noticeable segment of applicants were unhealthily obsessed with all things Egyptian. Discouraged from serving, they provided a foretaste of the occult aura that sometimes overtook the museum during King Tut, when a visitor might unexpectedly kneel to pray, unhindered, in Stanley Field Hall.

We kept volunteer shifts short in the information booths at the north and south doors. Two hours was the limit for anyone to respond politely to endlessly repeated questions about hours, membership, exhibit dates, and the whereabouts of the restrooms. The gift shop, a more varied volunteer assignment, did a lively and lucrative business. It also became the setting for a crisis in volunteer management. A paid cashier reported to her supervisor that a volunteer was lifting ten-dollar bills from the cash register and stuffing them in her pocket. Carolyn, who was then in charge of volunteers, saw it for herself. She also identified the volunteer as the

wife of one of Chicago's wealthiest men. After a hurried meeting with the director, the Field announced a new policy: effective immediately, volunteers would not handle money.

Ten thousand visitors a day, for a museum that rarely hosted that many in a month, was very hard on the staff. There were casualties: "nervous breakdowns" (as they were called then), divorces, and a suicide. For those who toughed it out, the price was high. Everyone was tired, irritable, and worried about all the regular, ongoing work of the museum that was not getting done.

The building also took a lot of hits; continual upkeep was a necessity. Early each morning, a dozen workers went through the exhibition, touching up paint and removing chewing gum from the floor. To stem the tide of gum, volunteers were assigned to board school buses on arrival, welcome the newcomers, then make the kids drop their gum into a paper bag. This idea, which doubtless originated with a volunteer, made a big difference.

Despite efforts to control crowd flow through timed ticketing, people moved through *Treasures of Tutankhamun* like cars in gridlock. Visitors, who famously never give exhibit labels a glance, read every word. And gazed in wonder at all the objects, and tried to backtrack, against one-way traffic, to start all over again. We noticed a bottleneck in one corridor-like space, where a series of graphic panels on the right-hand wall drew visitors to one side. To speed up circulation, the exhibits department mounted a duplicate set of panels on the left-hand wall. To our astonishment, most visitors crossed back and forth to read both sets of labels. They didn't want to miss anything!

The press of the crowd discouraged people with mobility limitations from visiting *King Tut*. John White, the museum's sole Native staff member, proposed that we set aside times when they might visit in wheelchairs, using walkers, on gurneys, etc. Many of us were supportive, but upper management was not. All Field staffers were fortunate, though; we could bring family members, and tour the exhibit ourselves, any morning between daily cleanup and

public opening. It was wonderful to share that experience, several times, with Jack and Rachael, our young daughter.

One day I got a call from a woman who told me that her 11-year-old son, dying of leukemia, wished very much to visit the King Tut exhibit. Because of his condition, he couldn't be in crowds. Would there be a way for him to get a private tour? I knew better than to ask any higher-ups, or even a fellow department head. Conspiring with the lead guard for the morning shift, some of us arranged to sneak the boy and his family in early through the school group entrance. The family had no idea that anything irregular was going on; as far as they were concerned, it was a private tour.

No one saw us as we rode the freight elevator to the second floor, and toured the exhibit. I don't remember the boy's name, but I have never forgotten two questions he asked me: "How old was King Tut when he died?" and "What did he die of?"

Part of what makes a museum great, I believe, is that it's physically big enough, and has enough scope and staff, that rules can be bent or broken when they should be. The leukemia victim's tour is an example. Of course, expansiveness can be put to less worthy uses.

During the renovation, the construction company's project manager (a married man) somehow found the time and occasion to strike up an acquaintance, and then launch a full-blown affair, with a departmental secretary (a married woman). Unbeknownst to me (and to most staff), their early-morning romantic trysts took place in an empty space behind the Pennsylvania Coal Forest diorama, in the dinosaur hall. Someone ratted them out, and one of the VPs caught them *in flagrante*. Never did news spread faster, pre-internet, through five floors of offices. The bad news came next: she was fired. He wasn't. In retrospect, we should have protested this injustice, but we didn't. Bending the rules only went so far.



The Pawnee Earth Lodge (above) broke new ground more successfully. This was one of John White's great ideas. Although it would be an exhibit, it was housed in the Department of Education.

John told us that when he brought Native kids from Chicago's Uptown neighborhood to the museum, they were put off. The Indian halls, as they were called, looked dead, in contrast to the energy, cultural revitalization, and anti-termination activism found on their home reservations, and in Native urban gatherings. He proposed that the museum create a full-scale replica of a traditional Native dwelling. The structure would be fully enclosed, screening off the nearby displays and immersing visitors in a richly furnished interior. A Pawnee earth lodge was a likely candidate. The self-enclosed, circular structure could be scaled down to fit into the intersection of two galleries in the Indian halls. But before moving ahead with his idea, John traveled to Pawnee, Oklahoma to meet with elders and council members. Their permission and support were essential. They recommended a key reference, *The Lost Universe: Pawnee Life and Culture*, by anthropologist Gene Weltfish. She had worked intensively with Pawnee informants. He also learned that tribal members had last built an earth lodge as a display at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904.

The mid-1970s was a time of gas shortages and widespread unemployment. The federal CETA program (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act), infused enough cash into our project to pay a master carpenter, a multi-talented artisan, and a

bunch of what would now be called interns. Under John's direction, we committed to use traditional techniques and materials to build the earth lodge and furnish it with authentic replicas. From the beginning, the Pawnee earth lodge was conceived as a self-enclosed environment that would immerse visitors in a traditional Native dwelling. The interns obtained a cottonwood tree and willow saplings, and researched methods and tools for hide tanning, sewing, and a host of other details.

Of course, we had to make compromises. A traditional earth lodge had a smoke hole and a doorway; its only light source was the fire at the center of the earthen floor. A fire in a museum exhibit was out of the question. We wanted to light the interior unobtrusively, but this turned out to be impossible. Electric light was too jarringly modern, but a pitch-dark interior wouldn't work for visitors. Replica objects, from buffalo robes to drums and parfleches, would disintegrate or disappear rapidly with unsupervised use. We decided to recruit volunteer docents who would receive special training to host visitors in the lodge. When not staffed, the lodge would be closed off, with a chain-link door allowing visitors to look inside.

We had a protracted fight with the security department. John affirmed that Native dwellings always open to the east. Because of the earth lodge's location, an east door would face toward the back of the gallery. All kinds of dire scenarios were envisioned by the head of security. But we held firm, the doorway faced east, and the imagined high-crime area did not materialize.

The Field's master carpenter drew plans for the lodge based on photographs and Gene Weltfish's descriptions. Some crucial details were missing, and he had to figure out how to make it work. A Pawnee elder visited the museum when the lodge was nearly built. As a young man, he had been one of the tribal members who built the earth lodge for the St. Louis World's Fair, and he remembered some of those missing details. I was present when the master carpenter explained, in a very humble way, how he had addressed various problems. It turned out that he had done just what the Pawnees would have done. What a great cross-cultural moment!

A busload of Pawnees came from Oklahoma for the opening of the earth lodge. They must have had hotel rooms, but they spent most of their time at the museum. John White arranged for them to have complete access to the Pawnee collections. One woman recognized a comb that had belonged to her. They found old Edison cylinder recordings of Pawnee songs, and sat up all night listening and singing. They set the agenda for the opening ceremony, with moving speeches of recognition and thanks, and a demonstration of tribal sovereignty, tribal chair = museum director. Some of the elders presented a blanket to director Lee Webber, and wrapped him in it, leaving him speechless and visibly moved. I don't think that erstwhile accountant from Chicago's North Shore had ever imagined such a moment.

In the early 2000s, the earth lodge was taken apart, relocated, and rebuilt, prolonging the life of this very popular exhibit and adding new information and artifacts from contemporary Pawnee life. When it was rededicated, another delegation from the Pawnee Nation traveled to Chicago to attend.

My six years at the Field were better than any postdoc. Amid supportive, gifted colleagues, I was shielded from budget worries but encouraged to write grant proposals—a skill that later proved invaluable. The Field pioneered the now-standard practice of including an educator in exhibit development teams. I served on several, collaborating with curators and designers—work that later brought me joy and income over several decades.

At a time when the film *Nine to Five* accurately reflected most women's working conditions, I was given maximum opportunity to grow professionally and personally. But after 12 winters in Chicago, I was ready for a milder climate. And our friends' nine-year-old son was held up for his lunch money on the bus. I told my colleagues I was looking. Soon, the curator of geology, Ed Olsen, mentioned a job opening in Eugene, Oregon, and encouraged me to apply. I did, promising him a case of beer if I got it. On the strength of my experience as a Field Museum department head, I was hired as director of a much smaller, but established and regionally well-known natural history museum. And Ed got his case of beer.



A child's sagebrush bark sandals from Catlow Cave in Eastern Oregon. They were found tied together by their laces.

### 3. Small is beautiful...and vulnerable

My interview was in March 1978. I flew from freezing Chicago to Portland, where green grass and circling hawks at the airport made an astonishing first impression. The puddle-jumper to Eugene flew over hills blanketed by yellow flowers. I learned later that Scotch broom is a pesky invasive, but I was excited to find spring already under way in Oregon. At the tiny Eugene airport, the dean of the College of Arts & Sciences held up a Field Museum brochure, a thoughtful, welcoming signal. That evening I dined with him and his wife in their home near the city's rhododendron garden; we walked there after dinner and heard owls hooting. Enchanting!

I was sold. The job didn't matter so much; moving to what seemed like a resort environment was overwhelmingly appealing. I never thought to ask crucial questions about governance, the museum's place within the larger institution, or the university's financial prospects. In our ten-minute conversation, the university president assured me that the timber industry was the reliable bedrock of the region's economy; tree planters replenished clear-cut forests at a sustainable rate, he said. A three-year contract with a salary just slightly lower than I was earning at the Field, with a moving allowance and decent benefits, sounded good to me. Having known success and a seemingly assured future at a world-class institution made me confident that I would do a fine job here as well. Five months later, we were in Eugene, staying with relatives, getting our daughter started at a magnet arts school, and looking to buy our first house. That first winter was so mild that I never once wore a coat! (The following winter I was as cold as everyone else in Eugene. It turned out that after a year away from arctic Chicago, my protective layer of subcutaneous fat had disappeared.)

The University of Oregon (UO) Museum of Natural History had the planet's most representative collection of Oregon artifacts and specimens: archaeology, ethnology, botany, and paleontology, with curatorial staff associated with each division. In 1978, a good portion of the collections, and the tiny exhibit gallery, were housed in a former plumbing shop that felt like a basement cave, though it stood

at ground level. The curatorial staff were mostly contracted, like myself, with the exception of a professor in the Department of Anthropology. This arrangement reflected the museum's origins as a program of that department, founded in the 1930s by Dr. Luther Cressman. I couldn't figure out why the anthropology professor was so hostile. But as I learned more about the realities of the position, it became apparent that he had every motivation.

As my boss, the dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, explained, my job was to secure state funding to create a splendid new showcase for Oregon's natural history. What I only learned bit by bit was very clear to the curators who had dedicated their professional lives to the museum. Creating the new museum would mean the near-complete destruction of the existing institution.

A professor of physics at the UO had cooked up a pet project: development of a museum "complex" across the river from the university, near the football stadium. Phase 1, a privately funded science museum, was under way. Plans were well along for Phase 2, a new home for the Lane County Historical Museum. The Oregon Museum of Natural History was to be Phase 3—a state museum for exhibition purposes only. The collections would stay on campus, but the herbarium would close, its contents absorbed by Oregon State University's herbarium. Only tenured faculty would retain curatorial positions; contracted staff, except for state-funded "highway archaeologists," would be let go.

To top it off, until I showed up, the museum director had always been a professor of anthropology. My Ph.D. in education did not impress the person whose job I had taken, anthropology Professor Don Dumond. He seemed to hate my guts. It took me quite a while to understand that it wasn't personal. It was a rational, deep-seated response to a takeover by campus bigwigs who had no interest in the history, research accomplishments, or community value of the existing museum. And I had signed on to work for them.

In contrast with the Field Museum, with its 350 employees and its multi-million-dollar budget, a small campus museum must get its work done with scant resources and a tiny staff. My bare-bones

office came with utilitarian steel furniture, a typewriter, a phone, and no supplies. On the plus side, a brilliant, caring graduate teaching fellow had been assigned to the museum. Patricia "Patty" Krier was completing a master's degree in history. A fourth-generation Oregonian, she generously gave me a crash course on the region. Books such as Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion*, Luther Cressman's *Prehistory of the Far West*, and the novels of H.L. Davis were a revelation. Herbarium director Dave Wagner, archaeologist Rick Pettigrew, and paleontologist Eric Gustafson gave us detailed tours of their respective collections, each an invaluable and fascinating source of information.

The museum's "services and supplies" budget was about \$1000/year. After struggling with ordering a box of pencils (which required filling out a form with 12 copies, each to be sent to a different department), I ponied up for supplies at the university bookstore. And Patty and I began brainstorming about how to advance the museum's cause statewide. If the university was to succeed in building a new state natural history museum, the money had to come from the legislature. I would be the point person responsible for securing those funds.

Thomas Condon, Oregon's first geologist, traversed the state in search of fossils, and gave public lectures about the state's geologic history. Luther Cressman, founder of Oregon archaeology, had made the museum famous by his discoveries in Eastern Oregon. But the museum was also infamous, as the repository where artifacts and specimens were squirreled away, hidden from public view, with only a meager sampling displayed in small, poorly lit cases with inadequate interpretation. My daughter Rachael read my mind when she wistfully asked me one afternoon, "Mom, do you ever miss the Field Museum?"

The museum's research, published in a series of bulletins, was respected by colleagues at other academic institutions. Luther Cressman's pioneering use of carbon 14 dating was nationally recognized (and was still controversial in some quarters). But most state residents had no idea the museum existed, and those who did were likely indifferent or even resentful. How could we make the

museum more visible, and build ties with citizens (and their legislators) around the state?

The National Endowment for the Humanities to the rescue! While serving on a couple of NEH review panels, I had noticed that agency staff and reviewers were drawn to project proposals whose scope went beyond a single exhibit in a lone museum. What if we created a traveling exhibit? Patty's knowledge of the state's geography was pivotal as we developed a detailed proposal for *The Sandal and the Cave*, a modest-sized display on the archaeology of Eastern Oregon. Dr. Mel Aikens, a professor of anthropology who specialized in this subject, became our lead scholar. We teamed with Jan Coleman, who had trained as an architect and was eager to try her hand with exhibit design. The exhibit would travel in a van to towns in the eastern half of the state. We contacted libraries, banks, and community centers and found enthusiastic support. Months later, we got the good news: our project was funded. There were plenty of bumps in this initial venture, but the outcome was positive. The exhibit was well-received. The museum was on the map, perhaps for the first time ever, in the two-thirds of Oregon that was (and still is) mostly Republican and predominantly conservative.

Our little museum became a kind of poster child for NEH, which subsequently funded several more traveling exhibits on topics geared to different parts of the state. An important element in each of these exhibits was the involvement of paid Native consultants. In the process of identifying and recruiting these cultural experts, Patty and I had gotten to know Twila Souers, a Lakota elder and director of the Natives Program at Eugene's school district. With her support, we submitted a proposal to NEH's Youth Program. Native and non-Native kids would meet in a workshop setting with Native elders during three Saturdays, for storytelling, riverside walks, demonstrations of traditional skills, etc. The details were entrusted to Twila and the other elders. On the first Saturday, the Native kids were quiet and attentive; the non-Native kids were talkative and restless. But even by the second meeting, all the youth were following the Native norms. This program was a one-off, and we did no evaluation, but everyone felt the program had been successful in serving a remarkable blend of cultures and generations.

While pursuing grant funding for the traveling exhibit program, Patty and I spent most of our first year on the job figuring out how to sell the legislature on the new museum project. The traveling exhibit program was in its nascent stages; we could talk to some legislators about the exhibit that would open in their community next year. The only other talking point was the collection. But how to convey the richness and educational potential of fossils, stone tools, and an eclectic bunch of ethnographic objects?

Enter Don Hunter. Retired after decades as the university's media specialist, Don was known throughout Oregon for his traveling slide shows. Using a bank of Kodak slide projectors, dissolve units, and arcane automation devices, Don showed 30- to 60-minute programs on two or even three portable screens. Don's narration, and music pirated from LPs, were built into each show. All this fit in the trunk of his small sedan. His productions took him to museums, libraries, service clubs, and fundraisers. "Hasn't God Been Good to Oregon!" was shown on network TV every Easter.

Don took a shine to the museum. He was excited to work with us (pro bono!) to create a slide show that would take the museum to the legislature. With advice from my then-husband, Jack Carnes, Don used excerpts from a Mahler symphony, lively and upbeat, as background for a ten-minute program (on one screen only). When I made my pitch to the Ways and Means Committee, this persuasive media piece would follow. And it worked! We were given a significant chunk of planning money to move the project forward.

The funds would be channeled through a recently appointed government body, the Cooperative Museum Commission. The CMC, also the brain child of the overactive physics professor, brought together representatives from partners in the museum complex project. Its home was the county: Lane County, the size of Connecticut, stretching from ocean beaches to the Cascade mountains. I was not a member of the Commission, but I had learned upon arrival that I would be attending its meetings. In fact, the physics professor suggested that since I had very little to do at the soon-to-be-extinct Museum of Natural History, I should also become the director of the soon-to-open science museum—with no

additional pay. I refused, and that was when my relationship with the physics professor began to deteriorate.

The Commission members and I began working with a local architect, the same person who had designed the science museum. Plans took shape as we completed schematic design for a state natural history museum. It was exciting. But then the entire project, like every other new or long-lived regional enterprise at that time, was engulfed in an economic catastrophe.

While sheltering in place during the Covid-19 virus pandemic, I was struck by its similarities to the situation here in 1979. Of course, the demise of the timber industry didn't include widespread sickness and death. But almost overnight, nearly all the mills closed, along with the many timber-related businesses. Housing starts dried up; loggers, mill workers, and construction workers were laid off. There were only two or three jobs listed in the newspaper classifieds, the sole source of employment opportunities in those pre-internet days. People lined up around a city block to apply for a job cleaning the rooms at a motel. And this happened all over the Pacific Northwest.

We went through the motions, and completed the schematic design. The Cooperative Museum Commission continued to meet. Our traveling exhibit program was just gaining traction, but as a nonparticipant in the university's tuition-based funding model, the museum suffered ruthless budget cuts, and seemed well on its way to being shut down. The administration kindly tacked on an extra year to my contract when they gave me notice, along with other non-faculty employees.

The end of my employment coincided with the end of my marriage. I wanted above all things to stay in Eugene, so Rachael could live in the same house, go to the same school, and have the same friends. Thanks to the unstinting support of my parents, who co-owned my house for several years and paid for my divorce, I had some breathing room. The director of the Cooperative Museum Commission told me that the local science museum CEO had quit. Mend your fences with the physics professor, she advised, and the job is yours. I did, entering a new world—running a small nonprofit

science museum. Against the odds, though, UO's Museum of Natural History pulled through. The following account by former director Don Dumond describes what happened.

[In 1982,] circumstances led to the increased expectation of failure with regard to the projected Oregon State Museum of Natural History. The State of Oregon's budgetary problems were visited on all of the agencies represented on the Lane County Cooperative Museum Commission. This caused an immediate shrinking of financial contributions to support the Commission, with attendant difficulty to pay remaining staff. Further, there was a growing understanding that although the State of Oregon might be expected to assist with construction funds for the museum, there was essentially no hope that State funds would operate the new entity. Funding would depend upon the Commission or other locally initiated efforts. For the existing Museum of Natural History, however, the immediately stringent situation was posed by the UO when the budgetary situation grew increasingly dire as State financial contributions continued to decrease.

The result: a decision by the University administration to close the existing Museum of Natural History. The contract of Director Carnes was not renewed, effective the end of the academic year 1981-82. The various museum collections would remain in the care of the appropriate university departments to which they had been transferred in 1977, and Dumond, director of the Oregon State Museum of Anthropology, was informed by the Dean of Arts and Sciences (formerly the College of Liberal Arts) that he would now also function as director of the UO Museum of Natural History until that activity could be essentially buried — whether or not any State Museum of Natural History was ever to be created in Alton Baker Park. Thus at least the Museum of Natural History and the Oregon State Museum of Anthropology were effectively reunited, although in the face of a severe budget shortfall.

Nevertheless, in 1982 the third of the traveling exhibits promoted by former Director Carnes for the Museum of Natural History was only poised to begin its movement around Oregon, and the fourth was still being completed (it would later travel into 1984). These displays were supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities,

according to terms of the funding it was not feasible to close out Museum functions entirely. Although direct costs of the traveling displays were borne by grant funds, a small allowance from the University was necessary to pay for continued telephone and other minor support services so long as the grants were in effect and the exhibits continued their travels. Further, not everyone in the university administration was happy with the decision forced upon them by finances. In particular, Professor Glenn Starlin, now a Vice-Provost in the central university administration, was concerned enough to appeal to his friend William J. ("Bill") Bowerman for assistance. Bowerman, the retired UO track and field coach, lifelong Oregonian, co-founder of Nike Inc., and local philanthropist, gave funds that allowed the Museum of Natural History to function for academic year 1982-83. He renewed his support for two more years. By 1984-85, the university was able to resume funding on a modest basis.

During this most stringent period, staffing for the Museum of Natural History was limited to a single regular employee—the former graduate assistant who had served with Director Carnes—assisted by a few student employees partly supported by federal work-study funds available through the University. As a result, actual closure of the museum display facility on the Oregon campus was limited to only a few weeks.

By this time, it was clear that the near demise of the University's Museum of Natural History had largely resulted from two factors: the museum had traditionally stressed research rather than programs for the public, and had contributed little to the university's mission of classroom instruction. Consequently, support for its continuation had been almost nonexistent within the university and in the larger community. Within the Museum, two efforts were therefore begun immediately. The first was the organization of an association of Friends of the Museum of Natural History, to build moral and financial support both within the University and from the community at large. And development of a functional museum store was pushed.

At the same time, preparations were made to begin teaching a museology course within the Museum. After some study and comparison of related offerings from other departments within the university, the first study course, titled "The Anthropology

Museum," was held in winter term of 1983-'84, instructed by the Museum of Natural History director, and was continued annually thereafter for a number of years.

("Director Carnes" is me. I went back to Parman after my divorce. The museum's website kindly acknowledges the name change.)



Patricia "Patty" Krier, my invaluable UO Museum of Natural History colleague, in the 1980s.

The museum's survival enabled my former assistant, Patricia Krier—the "sole employee" noted in Dumond's account—to make a career at the museum, serving as an educator, as director of public programs, and finally as director of development. She then came out of retirement to lead the successful effort to gain accreditation from the American Alliance of Museums. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Krier served on a team revising the museum's strategic plan in light of it. Ann Craig, her successor and mentee, is now the museum's associate director and an outstanding thought leader in the field.

In recognition of its accomplishments, the Museum of Natural and Cultural History received the Institute of Museum & Library Services' National Medal for Museum and Library Service in 2018. In other words, it didn't just survive but thrived, reshaping the plan for which I was originally brought on and then going far beyond it.

**A frail parchment of incredible power**

By PAUL DENISON  
The Register-Guard  
1-13-1986

**A** N OLD LATIN document rife with obscure legalisms goes on display today at the Willamette Institute of Science and Technology (WISTEC).

If you have a keen interest in seafaring, armament, scoupe and burpug, wapentakes and ridings or novel dissents, this is the show you've been waiting for. If you're interested in the ancient English roots of our modern legal system, or the history of the English language, click and cell doors slam — this is a show not to be missed.

The Magna Carta, or Great Charter, that rebel barons forced down King John's throat at Runnymede in 1215 will be on display at WISTEC through Sunday, Jan. 23, along with original Gregorian Chant notation and other materials explaining how Magna Carta relates to Americans today. The original Magna Carta, which the Magna Carta comes to Oregon from its home at Lincoln Cathedral in England.

According to the introduction of an English translation, Magna Carta was "not the first charter of its kind, but it was the first statement of English liberties dependent upon its unusually elaborate form."

In redressing the grievances of his unruly barons, King John had to

Turn to MAGNA CARTA, Page 2D

Members of the Society for Creative Anachronism reenact the signing of the Magna Carta.  
Staff photo by Don West



Newspaper publicity for WISTEC's Magna Carta exhibition.

## 4. A Different World

The tiny Willamette Science & Technology Center (WISTEC) in Eugene only faintly resembled Chicago's Museum of Science & Industry or San Francisco's Exploratorium. As I gradually learned, whatever their size, these institutions had something in common, something very different from the educational approach and values I had encountered at museums of natural history.

But these differences were secondary during my tenure at WISTEC. Far more pressing were the everyday concerns of any small nonprofit. Nothing in my experience had prepared me for the unrelenting bills that had to be paid monthly and quarterly. Meeting payroll is one thing if you own a small business; that's what sales are for. But with very few exceptions, nonprofits earn less than half their revenue from sales (admissions, tickets, auctions, etc.). Foundation grants and corporate sponsorships take up some of the slack, but most of them are geared to special projects rather than day-to-day operations. Individual contributions are by far the leading source of recurring funds with few or no strings attached.

On my first day as WISTEC's director I learned that we had two weeks' worth of operating money in the bank. My previous experience with nonprofit fundraising was selling Girl Scout cookies and magazine subscriptions to family and neighbors. But I was motivated. Some people in the community were good at raising money even in these perilous times—why not me?

Two people helped me get started. Hope Pressman was a dollar-a-year employee of the University of Oregon Foundation. Over lunch at the faculty club, she kindly taught me the basics:

- Find out who is interested in education/museums, who has money, and ask mutual acquaintances to make introductions.
- Describe how the museum already makes a difference in the community and how it will become even more visible and effective in future.
- Ask for a specific amount, and don't lowball.

- Read the local paper for tips on who's selling, who's buying, who's got a new job, who's leaving town, who's getting divorced, and who died.
- Ask board members and other friends to recommend potential donors.
- Create a card file (i.e., a database).

A member of the Cooperative Museum Commission, Dale Anderson, set up a meeting with the local manager of the phone company. He advised me to make my pitch for the museum and then ask for \$4,000. The phone company guy wrote a check on the spot. I'm sure it was all pre-arranged, but it was a big boost to my confidence and gave WISTEC some breathing room. We now had a month and a half of operating money.

And that's how it went, during almost all of my six years as director. Thank God for Carolyn Pape—another Carolyn—who was office manager, bookkeeper, purchasing agent, and my indispensable right-hand person. When she sat down by my desk unexpectedly, I knew I was about to hear that we would run out of funds soon if I didn't get out and raise some more money. This boom-and-bust cycle continued even though we mounted special exhibits that drew thousands of people. We never could get away from the fact that an influx of visitors meant staff overtime, more supplies of toilet paper, etc., extra building maintenance, and the like.

Several factors made developing a fruitful donor base very challenging. WISTEC's exhibits and programs were geared to children aged five to nine. Our small exhibit area and limited program space didn't allow for the kinds of varied offerings that make larger science museums appealing to teens and adults. Kids participated enthusiastically in creative workshops, camps, and special events, but once they turned ten, we never saw them again. Their parents and grandparents shifted their donations elsewhere.

And the enthusiasm of WISTEC board members was grounded in their support of education and the sciences. They loved our programs and were eager to show up and volunteer. But they had little or no fundraising experience, few connections to people with

money, and only a sketchy idea of board responsibilities and liabilities. This was my first venture as a nonprofit director, trying my best, but painfully aware that I was not equipped to move the board in the direction of fundraising.

The third factor was the economy, which continued to decline for about a decade after the calamitous 1979 downturn. We didn't need a lot of money—one of my most successful arguments was that at WISTEC, a little went a long way. We stayed afloat, but it was an uphill battle. I was working 60 to 90 hours a week, spending 90 percent of that time raising money.

Still and all, we had some great times! The four-person staff included some of the most creative and dedicated museum professionals I've ever had the privilege to know. Paul Vollom was our esteemed, eccentric, and super-talented exhibit designer-fabricator. Gail Winterman, a creative and dedicated educator, contracted with talented teachers to staff a lively program of technology and nature study workshops and day camps. I've already mentioned Carolyn Pape, who kept us all solvent and legal. And meanwhile, my personal life had taken a turn for the better. I met my soulmate and life partner, John Zerzan, in 1983 and our lives have been intertwined ever since. We've been married since 2000.



The author with John Zerzan.

WISTEC's first blockbuster exhibit was a major Smithsonian touring exhibition, *Yesterday's Tomorrows: Past Visions of the American Future*. It barely fit inside our 3000-square-foot gallery. The sainted members of a local Kiwanis Club found donated offsite storage and moved our permanent exhibits there for the duration.

The entire museum was dedicated to a primarily graphic show devoted to the futurology of the 1950s. For \$500, Eugene's leading ad agency wrote a marketing plan; with the help of a federally-funded intern, we implemented it with great success. Safeway gave out *Yesterday's Tomorrows* shopping bags, downtown store windows featured space age themes, and people came from all over Oregon to see the state's first-ever Smithsonian exhibit.

We lived off the ticket sale proceeds for a few months, but then it was business as usual for the director/fundraiser. With a new wrinkle, because what rabbit would we pull out of the hat next? The tired old science exhibits just didn't have the cachet of *Yesterday's Tomorrows*. The answer to our prayers showed up when an enterprising company marketed a line of animatronic dinosaurs. They're old hat now, but they were big news in the 1980s. We could fit six or seven of the creatures in our exhibit space, and when they roared and moved, they were a sight to see. Again, thousands of visitors showed up. Memberships exploded as children clamored to come weekly and even daily to commune with their favorites.



Lincoln Cathedral's Magna Carta exemplar.

The boom-and-bust cycle repeated. Tired old exhibits didn't draw many visitors. Blockbusters were scarce. Money was tight. Fundraising was hard. Then another opportunity arose. The son of the dean of England's Lincoln Cathedral had been deputized to

help the cathedral earn some money by touring its exemplar of Magna Carta. That's the document that some English barons forced King John to sign in 1215, establishing some legal principles that still endure today. Lincoln Cathedral's handwritten parchment is called an exemplar, not an original: multiple copies of the original were made by scribes for distribution throughout the kingdom. One of them happened to end up in Lincoln, preserved in its cathedral.

Because the document is priceless, it needed 24-hour police protection. It is also fragile, and had to be displayed in a special climate-controlled case. After vetting all the local museums, the cathedral's representative decided that WISTEC was the best place to show the Magna Carta. The building had almost no windows, so it was easily secured and guarded, and its location next to the UO football stadium meant that there were acres of free parking.

When I presented this opportunity to the board, they raised a sound objection. What did Magna Carta have to do with our science and technology mission? As we brainstormed how this might work, I proposed involving the Society for Creative Anachronism as a partner. Their members would offer live demonstrations of medieval technologies to augment the rather slim contents of the Magna Carta display itself: the document and a few graphic panels. The SCA was enthusiastic. We booked the show for ten days, planning to stay open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. I enlisted the support of the county's police forces; several dozen officers donated their time as guards, while regular patrols ensured Magna Carta's safety at night.

One problem remained to be solved. Everyone 40 and older had at least heard of Magna Carta and had a vague idea of its significance. But people under 40 had no clue. How could we get them interested? In those days, cable television was just emerging. The local cable firm was obliged to produce and air public service announcements. A friend of mine lived in the country and had a pair of horses. Two SCA members knew how to ride. Our 30-second PSA showed two men in medieval garb riding through an oak forest. Narrator: "From all corners of England, the barons are riding to Runnymede to confront King John and force him to sign Magna Carta..." I can't remember the exact wording, but the point

was that this document had a lot to do with our own freedoms today, and it was coming to WISTEC for such-and-such dates. It was such a powerful visual promo that all the network stations aired it repeatedly; it even won an award. And it worked: we had 10,000 visitors in ten days. People stood in line in the rain to get in.

This led to the finale of my career as a blockbuster impresario. A string of successes gave me unmerited confidence in what tough, entrepreneurial little WISTEC could accomplish. The next step—a fatal one for me—was to secure a National Science Foundation grant to develop and circulate a traveling exhibit on kaleidoscopes. What a great topic, and a local craftsman who made and sold kaleidoscopes would be the content specialist. What could possibly go wrong? Well, just about everything. WISTEC's annual budget was still about \$120,000. The grant was for \$60,000. The effect on our operations was like dropping a boulder into a rowboat. I was soon in over my head trying to serve as director, fundraiser, and project manager. The staff was pulled into the project, to the detriment of ongoing operations. To cap it off, a key collaborator proved to be a nightmare. A handshake deal left me with no leverage as things went south. Between trying to keep WISTEC afloat and running an increasingly dysfunctional project, I hit the proverbial wall. I still regret that I only gave two weeks' notice, leaving the staff and the board to pick up the pieces. Which they did: Eugene Science Center, as WISTEC is now known, is a going concern.

I could write a separate chapter—possibly another book—on the perils of small non-profits. If I were to add more items to Hope Pressman's invaluable list of fundraising basics, they would be:

- Only raise funds for projects your organization can sustain.
- If a project fails to raise the funds it needs, then scrap it.
- Neither luck nor grit are substitutes for resilient operation.
- If you need a second job to make ends meet, that's a sign.
- A perennial crisis means that underlying issues must be fixed.
- You're not actually superhuman, so run things accordingly.



WISTEC became the Science Factory and then the Eugene Science Center.



Craig Kerger, whose timely phone call in 1989 rescued me.

## 5. On to New Adventures

Having cut my ties with the science museum, the first thing I did was file for unemployment, for the first (and only) time in my life. The next thing I did was go to what was left of Eugene's downtown shopping district, and buy an interview suit for \$500 with my Visa card. Because unemployment wasn't going to cut it. I needed a job. Jobs were scarce, but I was in luck.

During my stint as director of WISTEC, I formed a partnership with my friend Karen Johnson, who also had nonprofit experience. We called our business Funding Collaborations, and hired out as consultants to nonprofits that needed help with fundraising. We had some success, too. This was a helpful side gig for me, as a single mom, and for Karen, it was her sole source of income. When the Oregon Arts Commission (OAC) advertised for a contractor to help with community arts outreach, Karen submitted an application on behalf of Funding Collaborations. Soon afterwards, she got a full-time job offer from the University of Oregon—too good to pass up. When Funding Collaborations was named as a finalist, Karen and I asked the director if they would consider an application from me alone. They said yes, and to my delight I was hired.

Karen and I had created and taught workshops on fundraising, grant writing, marketing, and board development. All this became useful as I phoned staff members of Oregon's regional arts councils to find out what would be most useful for them. A schedule of site visits and workshops took shape, starting with Klamath Falls.

But there was one complication: just after OAC decided to hire me, I suffered a mild stroke. "Mild" meant that my brain, balance, speech, and most of my body were unaffected. Unfortunately, my left hand was paralyzed. I was 46. Life had clearly taken a toll! This experience taught me how much of my life required two hands. Eating, brushing my teeth, bathing, putting on clothes were challenging tasks. Fortunately, miraculously, an intensive physical therapy session enabled me to overcome the paralysis. In the rehab gym, the therapist had a small double clothesline hung with

clothespins. She challenged me to move the clothespins from one line to the other, with my left hand. How was I to do this? She said, "Just do it." With an effort somewhere in my brain that seemed almost muscular, I managed to get my index finger and thumb working, open a clothespin, move it to the other line, and close it. This took a long time. Three hours later, I had moved all the pins, and feeling and movement had returned to my hand. I was drenched in sweat, as if I'd run a race. Returning to my hospital room, I slept for hours. When I awoke, my hand was still mobile, though very weak. By squeezing a tennis ball almost constantly for weeks, I gradually regained strength in my (non-dominant) left hand. As the doctor explained, I had been able to form new neural pathways.

I was on a strong blood thinner at this point, and couldn't manage the five-hour drive to Klamath Falls. But a woman who lived near Eugene volunteered to drive me back-and-forth in exchange for attending the workshop. I was able to facilitate a well-attended event, enjoy visiting with OAC board members and staff, and even find time for a short hike near downtown. I saw the renowned roost of black-crowned night herons, and unforgettably, was unobserved by frolicking otter pups who tumbled down a slope onto the hiking path. They took off as soon as they saw me, but what a lovely sight!



Community Arts Director Peter Sears.

My assignment with OAC was to spend nine months as the outreach assistant to Community Arts director Peter Sears. Peter was a lovely man, a poet, who wanted the Oregon Arts Commission to offer professional development workshops to arts councils and their nonprofit members throughout the state.

Across those nine months, I don't remember how many workshops I planned and taught with Peter, but I recall visiting Bend, Hood River, La Grande, Pendleton, Medford, Salem, Brookings, Newport, and Astoria. The thriving arts council in Portland didn't need my services, and I can't recall whether Eugene was on the circuit. During my time at WISTEC I had served two terms as president of the Oregon Museum Association, so some of these destinations were already familiar. But for the most part, this was a rare opportunity to explore Oregon in greater depth.

The contrast with my daily life as WISTEC's director could not have been more extreme: leisurely drives through stunning terrain, welcome and hospitality beyond measure, the sense that I was contributing to the success of nonprofits around the state, and above all, no obligation to fundraise, no responsibility to meet a payroll. It was a welcome respite after years of hard work. OAC even gave me permission to take a few weeks off to travel to the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) with national museum colleagues, an all-expenses-paid trip (aka a junket).

Inevitably, the contract came to an end. It was nice while it lasted, but I needed a real job with benefits. A friend told me about an opening at UO—half time in the research office, half time in the business school—to help faculty members develop grant proposals to fund their research. I had written proposals that secured more than \$350,000 in grant funding and I had a Ph.D. I made the cut and was invited to interview for the position. What an interview! Because the research office served so many university departments, everyone wanted a seat at the table. I was interviewed by 20 people. This interrogation lasted about an hour and was one of the most stressful work experiences of my life. My blood pressure rose until I was sure I must be beet red. I don't remember a single question or answer, but somehow by the grace of God, I was hired.

Day One was instructive. The plan was for me to work 2 1/2 days in each office. I began in the research office and soon learned that "because this is a service office," I needed to check with the secretary whenever I left my desk—including when I went to the restroom! This was my first inkling of the management style of the Associate

VP who ran things. She had a deep need for control, enforced by these sorts of rules, and took all the credit for successes, never sharing or even acknowledging what her underlings contributed. After 16 years of relative independence, I was ill-equipped to tolerate this. I started looking for an escape route right away.

The business school was run in the opposite manner. The dean, a friendly sort who was an accomplished fundraiser, paid no attention to when people showed up and went home. He was interested in what you were able to accomplish while you were there. After I had interviewed every business school faculty member about their research interests, looked into possible funding sources, and begun working with the very few faculty members who were willing to give grant funding a try, I had plenty of time left over. The dean asked me to write for the biz school magazine and even to ghostwrite some speeches for him. He took me on trips to Portland to meet with donors, so I could write articles about them.

The head of the research office made it clear that as a full-time UO employee, I was not allowed to consult, so I couldn't take on workshops and other gigs on the side. This supposed regulation was widely ignored by business school faculty and administrators. Many of them had lucrative outside work as consultants, expert witnesses, and the like. I was aware of the injustice being done to me. I also missed the extra money that I'd been putting into my daughter's college education fund.

As I was grappling with this dilemma, the answer appeared unexpectedly. Before starting at UO, I'd written some exhibit text for The High Desert Museum in Bend, OR. I hadn't met the exhibit designer, Craig Kerger, but I admired his work. As it turned out, he liked the way I wrote. Craig was the design director of a big Portland firm, but he'd decided to start his own company, Formations Inc. To my complete surprise, he phoned me at home one evening and said, "I want you to move to Portland and work for me." I told him, "I'd love to work for you, but I will never move to Portland." I owned a home in Eugene, my parents had just moved there, my daughter was in high school, and I had done my time in big cities and found Eugene to be just the right size. Without

missing a beat, Craig said, "Okay, could you come to Portland one day a week?"

Following my interview in Portland, also a field trip for my daughter and her friends, Craig and I finalized our plans. I resigned from the research office but stayed on half-time at the business school to qualify for university benefits. This was 1989. I soon went full time for Formations; I would work for Craig's company as a writer for 14 years, all told. Soon after I started, I met with my accountant to review my taxes. She surprised me by saying, "You will never be audited." Why? "Because you're a writer, and you have an income." Indeed, I was and I did.



The author sparring with the late Muhammad Ali.

## 6. Learning on the Job

I had only the haziest notion of what a writer's duties would be at Formations. It was clear that they needed a writer; like many designers, Craig was a terrible speller. Despite being a charismatic communicator, he often misused words. His then wife and business partner had some marketing chops and had written/copy edited early versions of a brochure, as well as proposals. But my focus was exhibit projects. Craig vaguely mentioned note-taking, and of course there would be label writing. But what else?

Formations made an immediate splash among Northwest exhibit design firms by landing a plum project, The Museum at Warm Springs. This brand-new institution on the Warm Springs Reservation in Central Oregon was one of the nation's first tribal museums. Director Dr. Duane King, a white guy with an impressive museum resume, had good relations with tribal elders and council members. The tribe was 100 percent behind the project, and Duane and his board had raised enough foundation and private money to move forward with the design. Most important from my viewpoint, museum curator Liz Tewee was well known and trusted by Warm Springs tribal members as one of their own. Raised on the reservation, she was steeped in its traditions and knew everyone. The Confederated Tribes had paid for her museum education at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe and at the Smithsonian.

Warm Springs is a confederation of the Warm Springs, Wasco, and Northern Paiute tribes. More than a century of intermarriage has blurred those distinctions, but many in the community identified with a particular tribe. Each tribe's chief had a seat on the tribal council, and certain places on the reservation were associated with one tribe or another. During our first visit, Liz, Craig, and I met with elders in tribal groups. Our questions were the same for all, but the answers were sometimes quite different. This was the first of many lessons for me. I'd read everything I could find about the reservation's history in the University of Oregon library, but clearly, some of the most important facts weren't written down anywhere.

Craig asked me to facilitate these meetings. That was my first clue about my role as a writer. Drawing on my experience as a high school teacher, I worked through the questions. The facilitator role meant that I stayed quiet and waited for someone to speak. The results were so worth the wait! Each person spoke from the heart, and what they said was a revelation. I filled dozens of pages of notepad paper with close-to-verbatim notes. Facilitating and taking notes at the same time was possible because the elders spoke slowly, with pauses before, during, and after. Back home, I typed up the notes on an IBM Selectric typewriter in my business school office—this was in 1989, before personal computers and email were ubiquitous.

So far, so good, but Craig's next request really took me aback. "I want you to write a narrative walkthrough of the exhibit," he said. "What's a narrative walkthrough?" I asked. "You write something and I'll tell you if it's a narrative walkthrough," he replied. I gathered that he wanted a walk through an imaginary exhibit, narrated from the visitor's point of view. The tricky part was that I would have to imagine the exhibit. Wasn't that the designer's job? Apparently not. What a terrifying thought! But somehow, I was able to do it. In fact, it was exciting and creative—even fun.

I submitted a typed first draft via UPS, followed by the first of many phone call critique sessions with Craig. He was positive and supportive, added wonderful ideas, and told me what to change and redo. I got a tutorial on the costs of different exhibit components, and he suggested ways to make the exhibit more engaging without spending a fortune. The revised draft was a hit with the client team.

The Formations shop guys set about building a 3-d model. That was an essential part of the exhibit and architectural design process; now it's all done on a computer. While the screen version is less aesthetically pleasing, it has the big advantage of being relatively easy to modify. This would have come in handy when the tribal council came down hard on a crucial aspect of our exhibit concept.

One of our ideas was to depict Lewis and Clark from the viewpoint of the indigenous people of the Columbia River who rescued them

from starvation. A diorama would show the expedition members, dirty and bedraggled, staggering ashore to be welcomed by the locals. A miniature version of this historic moment was part of the model. I didn't attend the tribal council meeting where Craig described the concept, but he relayed their negative response. This exhibit was *not* going to be about Lewis and Clark. It was about the people of Warm Springs. That diorama had to go! Then the curator, Liz, had a brilliant idea: dramatize a wedding trade scene of the bride and groom's families meeting to exchange gifts. Audio narration and lighting effects would bring the event to life. The faces of the mannequins would be cast from those of tribal members.



In the diorama, both mothers adorn the bride.

This showpiece can still be seen at the Museum. It's a memorable highlight for visitors. When I took my then-teenage daughter for her first visit, she watched the five-minute program several times, and told me with excitement, "It's a great fashion show, Mom!"

Craig came back from a hike along the Warm Springs River with his pockets full of wild plants; "Here's our color palette," he said. We reworked the walkthrough, the guys reworked the model, and we were off and running. My writer duties expanded as I researched and wrote an exhibit outline, photographed and documented suggested images and objects, and finally wrote several drafts of exhibit text. Almost all the text was taken directly from the notes I'd made of the meetings with elders. While some quotes from archival sources conveyed a history of conquest and oppression, they were far outweighed by the elders' stirring memories and observations.

The more time I spent at Warm Springs, the more I found that people there perceived and thought and spoke in ways new to me. They knew so much about the area. I subscribed to the tribal newspaper, *Spilyay Tymoo* (Coyote Speaks). Each issue had a Geo Quiz with a photo taken somewhere on the reservation. The first person to identify its location would win a mug with the logo of the newspaper on it. The photos all looked the same to me—a bend in the road, one or two trees, maybe some sagebrush—but someone always pinpointed the exact spot. Living in the same place for generations, these people knew it intimately. I knew very few of their contemporaries who lived in communities long enough, and were observant enough or cared enough, to gain that knowledge.

After this first outing as an exhibit writer, I learned that once design development was completed and approved, I would be on to the next project. The design and production staff would take over, consulting me only when there was a problem to solve: an image couldn't be obtained or didn't work with the design; more text was needed; or text changes were required. At Warm Springs, not everyone agreed with parts of the text, and it was essential to get final approval. I spent a long day going through the 90-page draft text with museum board members, including the three tribal chiefs. Fortunately, the tribal lawyer had reviewed an earlier version. He knew where the landmines were and how to defuse them through rewording. By the end of the day, we had an approved text.



The Museum at Warm Springs.

The grand opening took place on a cold day in March. Crowds packed the exhibits, and I was glad the Formations crew's preview was the day before. John Zerzan and I adjourned to the salmon pit;

it was warm there, and the smell was delicious. The new museum was a big hit. Together with The High Desert Museum, Central Oregon now had two leading cultural destinations to attract people as they journeyed from Portland to the ski resorts. And Formations was on the radar as a worthy exhibit design and production firm.

In many ways, this was the ideal project. The crucial factor, to me, was having the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs as the client. They had total control over the content and interpretive approach. While I worked for Formations, we did one other project for an Native-run organization, but the rest of our exhibits about Native people were planned, designed, and built for white-led museums. Those clients had indigenous advisors and built formal relationships with tribes to ensure there would be a review process. The results were mixed. On the whole, the exhibit content lacked the specificity and indigenous voice that made the Warm Springs exhibits so compelling. There wasn't enough time to meet with elders, and without a Native curator, the exhibit content was too general to have much hope of transforming visitors' perspectives.

Our Warm Springs clients required that time be set aside for research, listening sessions, in-depth reviews, and community presentations. As Formations took on new work, much of that vital groundwork was compressed or dispensed with altogether. I only did three other projects with Formations with sufficient time budgeted for in-depth research: the Lincoln Museum (in Fort Wayne, Indiana), the National Steinbeck Center (in Salinas, California), and the Muhammad Ali Center (in Muhammad's hometown, Louisville, Kentucky). All three were well-funded design-build projects with strong curatorial support.

Focus groups and community meetings were standard for most jobs. An agricultural wing of the National Steinbeck Center was particularly sensitive. Although some Latinx were now labor contractors, many Latinx families in the Salinas Valley had labored for three or four generations in fields owned by white growers, most of them descendants of "okies." Cesar Chavez had organized strikes in Salinas, supported by Bobby Kennedy. The atmosphere was charged. How could we plan an exhibit that would tell an inclusive

story? To help us do this, Formations retained Dr. Tom Frye, founding curator of history at the Oakland Museum of California, to work with us to develop our focus groups.

We met with growers, ag-related business owners, and field workers. The field workers' session, scheduled for the end of the workday, included dinner, child care, and a basket of gifts for each participant. It was conducted entirely in Spanish. We asked each group the same questions. Predictably, the answers differed along owner/worker lines. But there was one area of agreement: when asked why they did what they did, members of all three groups answered, "So our kids will have a better life."

That was the key to our exhibit plan; we foregrounded families. The exhibit told a comprehensive story through the lives of diverse families. It was well-received in the region. Sometime later, I introduced myself to Dolores Huerta, Cesar Chavez's close ally, at a conference where she gave a keynote speech. When I mentioned that I had been involved at the Steinbeck Center, Ms. Huerta told me she had heard about the field worker focus group from friends in Salinas. Exhibit planning isn't typically the subject of reviews, and to me, the fact that she'd heard only positive things was a rave.

The projects I've mentioned took place over 14 years of far-reaching technological developments that transformed everyone's working life. As a telecommuter in 1989, I was just that: a person with a car and a telephone. Most Wednesdays I drove to Portland for face-to-face meetings with Craig and other colleagues. The rest of the week, I was home, working on three, four, or five projects at different stages of development. Formations bought me a computer, so I was able to create digital drafts, print them out, and fax them or ship them by UPS. I was a steady customer at a local UPS store that offered those two options. Gradually I made the shift to email, and sent duplicate discs to the office. At some point we were able to exchange attachments.

Formations grappled with the shift from conventional to digital imagery. When we were working on the Salinas Ag project, the Salinas newspaper switched to digital. I remember how hard it was

to figure out where the images were and how to access them. We hired a computer graphics specialist to help. No more typesetting and paste-up—it was all to be done in house, on the computer.

Working on the Lincoln Museum convinced me that I could not manage the content and the images/objects on my own. I had nightmares about missing images, etc. I insisted to Craig that I needed help, and before long someone was hired to research and outsource images.

Before the transition to digital, Formations created a "bible" for each project, with the most current text, outline, imagery, objects, and design specifications. Updates were painstakingly typed, and later computer-generated, but the only way to share them with clients was to print them out, photocopy them endlessly, and create a new edition of the bible at each project milestone. FileMaker Pro was the first mass-distributed software that offered digital storage for images. It was super clunky, but what a breakthrough!

During this same period there were big changes in national and regional economies, with reverberations for museums and their vendors. In 1989 the Northwest was still recovering from the depression-like effects of the timber crash of 1979–80, just as the Midwestern "rust belt" was emerging from a long downturn. The 1990s looked promising. Downtowns were reviving and long-established museums were itching to renovate or completely reinvent themselves. And new museums were springing up. Federal agencies began building new visitor centers. Formations benefited. We also began offering a new product, the interpretive plan. Much depended on the courage and foresight of the client. A plan could be audacious and visionary or timid and humdrum.

An interpretive plan for a whole institution was wrapped around one or more narrative walkthroughs describing new or remodeled exhibit halls. A museum or agency could invest in it at relatively modest cost. The planning process created buy-in and excitement, and the completed plan was an essential tool for fundraising. Yet not every plan led to more work for Formations. The director took another job, or a key donor opposed the plan, or the client issued an

RFP and hired another firm to implement the plan. Sometimes a project champion failed to rally community support, so fundraising lagged and the plan was abandoned. Some completed designs were put out to bid for fabrication, and Formations didn't always win.

My final project with Formations, The Muhammad Ali Center, was by far the most ambitious and costly I'd encountered. We had done several jobs for the Center's new director, Mike Fox. This was to be a brand-new museum in downtown Louisville, Muhammad's hometown. He and his wife Lonnie were deeply involved. It was a multi-million-dollar project, and Mike had already lined up major donations. Alarm bells went off for me when Mike told us that he had promised Muhammad that this would be "more than a museum." Visitors would have a "life-changing experience." I'd learned that one-time, life-changing experiences were rare to nonexistent in museums. It would be a quixotic task to hit that bar. Memorable, entertaining, educational, and worth seeing, yes, but life-changing? I argued the point, but Mike wouldn't be talked out of it. After all, he'd promised Muhammad and Lonnie.

My fears were compounded when our startup meeting consisted of only two client representatives: Mike and his deputy director. Not enough input, I felt. We knew we would be meeting Muhammad and Lonnie in person at a later date. But in my experience, a client team of one or two people is a recipe for trouble. Thumbs up, thumbs down and no real discussion.

We were just beginning our meeting when the secretary came in and said, "I think you should look at the TV." It was 9/11/2001; the first tower had been hit and we watched in horror as the second plane hit the other tower. News reports pointed to Islamist terrorists as the perpetrators. Mike turned pale and said, "There go most of our pledges." Lee Skolnick, an architect and design consultant to the project, rented a car and started for home; his office and residence were a few blocks from Ground Zero. My daughter and her husband Ben lived on Staten Island, and Ben commuted to Chelsea. Frantic to reach them, I couldn't get through. My husband in Eugene was able to get through and learn they were both safe. Craig, curator Susan Shaffer Nahmias, and I

stayed on in Louisville for several days until the planes started flying again. We had meetings with our clients, but everything seemed uncertain. We had dinner with Mike at one of the city's oldest and finest restaurants, lunched at Churchill Downs, and visited the Kentucky Derby Museum—as if we were tourists.

A highlight of the Muhammad Ali Center planning was a day spent with Muhammad and Lonnie Ali at their estate in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Muhammad took one look at the piles of outline-filled notebooks we brought and told us that we'd done a great job. At lunch, he entertained us with a couple of his set pieces. He drew a sketch of the Ali/Frazier fight and dedicated it to my daughter. I was in awe of meeting the man who had been a hero for me during the Vietnam War, when he gave up millions in prize money because he refused to do the government's bidding. After lunch, we walked out to a barn where Muhammad had a full-size boxing ring. I asked him, "Do you still get in the ring?" He put a hand up on the rope, swung himself in, and then beckoned me to join him. Luckily, I had recently taken a kickboxing class at the YMCA, so I knew the basics. Of course, he could have squashed me like a bug—but it was an amazing thing to be "sparring" with Muhammad Ali, while my colleagues captured the moment with their cameras.

Eventually Mike was able to raise enough money to fund the large-scale, media-driven exhibits he wanted. Formations almost went broke staffing up and going through multiple designs to please the clients. I wrote and rewrote text in an increasingly frustrating effort to find closure. The last straw came when I realized that the writing style expected was akin to the language of greeting cards, unlike the provocative, revelatory style to which Formations and I aspired.

A saving grace throughout the hectic Formations years was my steady gig as an adjunct faculty member at the University of Oregon. Once or twice a year, I offered workshop-style courses on exhibit development. Scheduled on weekends to suit my availability, "Planning Interpretive Exhibits" acquainted me with several cohorts of students who were earning master's degree in arts management. These courses later became the basis of my first publication, in collaboration with one of those students, Jeffrey Jane

Flowers. Jeffrey had experience in both exhibit and book design, and was an invaluable and congenial co-author. *Exhibit Makeovers: A Do-It-Yourself Workbook for Small Museums*, loosely modeled on the *For Dummies* series, sold well and led in time to workshop and conference opportunities beyond my day job.

For nearly two years, I contemplated going solo. I was making good money, because I was paid time and a half for overtime, and most jobs seemed to require a lot of overtime. But as a happily married woman, I didn't like being away from home. Sometimes I was on the road for as long as half the month. I often juggled four to six projects in various stages of completion, with tight and sometimes conflicting deadlines. Craig was like a brother to me, but he had a classic Type A personality. When I was leaving on vacation, he never said, "Have a great time and don't give us a thought." Instead, he would ask when I was coming back. And then, by accident, I learned that while I was paid \$28 per hour, the company billed me to clients at \$90 per hour. Clearly, I could make more money and probably put in fewer hours if I worked for myself.

Easier said than done. I'm a very loyal person and it was hard to picture leaving Formations. But I started saving money toward that end. I purchased *Consulting for Dummies* and *Business Planning Toolkit for Dummies*, and worked my way through both of them. When I had six months' worth of savings in the bank, a marketing plan, business cards, letterhead, and a website, I submitted my letter of resignation, giving two months' notice. Craig didn't pay any attention until about two weeks before the end date. Then he begged me to stay; it was like he was my boyfriend and I was breaking up with him. Fortunately, we parted amicably; Craig was my friend, and I hoped that Formations would be one of my clients. To their credit, the firm had never made me sign a non-compete agreement. I was able to contact people I'd met while working with Formations and let them that Alice Parman, Ph.D., was now available to do interpretive and exhibit planning at \$55 an hour.





The author at a book signing for *Exhibit Makeovers*, 2nd edition.

## 7. Hanging Out My Shingle

One of the most insightful commentators on the museum scene is Ed Rodley. He recently reflected on museums' inability to change despite the efforts of countless museum employees.

"I know so many talented friends and colleagues who went into organizations eager and willing to do the hard work to remodel them into better places. Most of them don't work in those places any more. If they're still in the field, they're consultants."

A memorable *New Yorker* cartoon showed two Trojans eyeing the Trojan horse suspiciously. "Maybe it's full of consultants," one of them warned. In the museum consulting world when I started out, one big peril consultants posed was to overestimate the numbers of visitors a new or expanded museum would attract. Using data like highway traffic counts that are correlative but not predictive, these consultants routinely and irresponsibly overshot reality.

A museum consultant serves her client's interests, not her own. That basic principle guided my own work as a museum interpretive planner. The tenets of my approach were as follows:

- Interpretive planning is grounded in the mission, vision, and identity of the museum.
- Interpretive planning serves the museum's current and potential visitors. The interpretive planner is their tireless advocate.
- Planning for accessibility improves the visitor experience for everyone. Exhibit and program offerings should be responsive to the diverse learning styles, range of ages, and varied cultural and educational backgrounds of the museum's target audiences.
- Make the most of the museum's in-house resources, local talent, and readily available expertise.
- Work closely and collaboratively with other project consultants, especially with the museum's exhibit designer and architect.
- Encourage and facilitate review and participation by museum and community stakeholders.
- Create an interpretive plan that is energizing and inspiring, yet realistic and doable within the museum's capacity and budget.

For exhibits focused on indigenous communities or specific cultural groups, I would only take the assignment if their members were meaningfully involved by the museum in the planning process.

Flying solo meant that factionalism on the museum side was evident very quickly. It was a bad sign when people sought to convince me that despite predictable opposition, I should listen to their views over the opinions of certain others. Like a priest, I heard many confessions and a lot of gossip. My steadfast rule was to keep it all to myself and maintain neutrality.

As a facilitator, I encouraged everyone, including the nay-sayers, to contribute their ideas to a brainstorming agenda. As a researcher and interviewer, I sought out people whose ideas were said to be outdated or just plain wacky. It was important to hear what they had to say, and equally important for them to feel included.

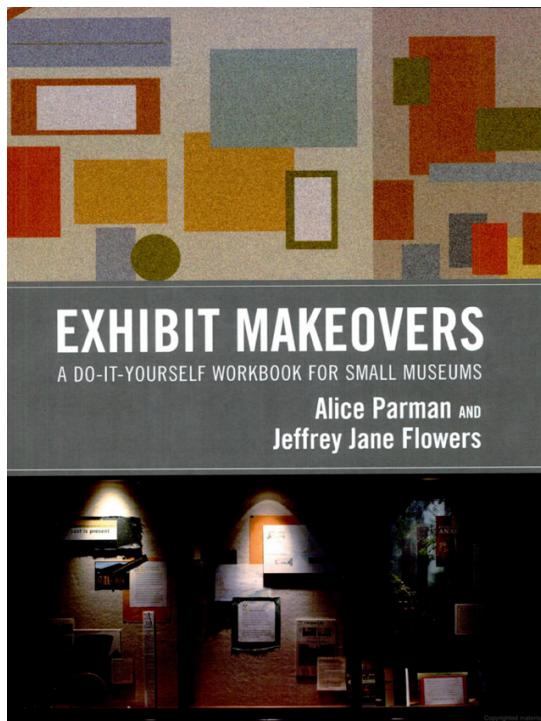
Most of these principles grew from experiences I'd had at Formations. Some takeaways:

- If the museum doesn't have a solid mission and a clear identity, planning will be an uphill effort.
- Community-wide participation and buy-in are essential.
- The scope and cost of the project has to be within reach.
- To ignore vocal opposition is fatal.

That last takeaway stems from working with a privately run, white-dominated Native history museum that had never gained traction. Feeling excluded, some members of the tribe put a curse on it. (We recommended they work on getting the curse lifted.)

An exhibit designer's early involvement is crucial to developing a target budget. As a freelancer, I worked with a number of designers, like Alan Ransenberg of The Alchemy of Design, who were eager to participate in planning process. Alan's creative ideas helped shape the exhibit plan, and his graphic and design skills greatly elevated the final document.

I also teamed with Lisa J. Watt, a member of the Seneca tribe and principal of Tribal Museum Planners & Consultants. She and I co-presented a workshop for the National Museum of the American Indian, and were part of a multi-firm planning process for the Hoonah Indian Association in Hoonah, Alaska.



The 2008 publication of the first edition of *Exhibit Makeovers* drew the attention of several state museum associations. I soon co-led workshops for the Utah Museums Association and for Museums Alaska. The latter generated my farthest-flung project, at Unalaska in the Aleutians. I also helped plan small museums and visitor centers in Dillingham, Haines, Juneau, Kodiak, and Valdez, Alaska—each amazing in its own way.

Alaska is quite different from the other 49 states. A combination of glaciation and volcanism makes for a breathtaking terrain. The sheer size of the state contributes to the diversity: tundra, forests,

and volcanic islands. Small planes and an extraordinary ferry system, the Marine Highway, link the various regions. Larger cities like Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau, along with Seattle, are where people go for specialized healthcare and higher education.

I attended the national meetings of the American Alliance of Museums and the American Association for State and Local History when they took place near me. But I'd gone faithfully to Western Museum Association (WMA) events since my museum director days, and continued that practice. I made an enduring friendship with Ellen Ferguson of Seattle's Burke Museum, my "roomie" at many WMA conferences. An interpretive plan I did later for the Burke, with Ellen's encouragement, gave me a close-up view of its vast collections and the chance to meet its excellent staff.

Other opportunities grew out of collaborations. Margie Marino began her museum career at the UO Museum of Natural History and was an evaluator at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History, then head of exhibitions at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. Formations Craig Kerger and I did a swap with her. We toured the Denver Museum's exhibits department and did a workshop for the staff on our approach to exhibit development and project management. Margie led an evaluation workshop at the Columbia River Maritime Museum, a Formations client, that we attended. After a stint as traveling exhibits manager for the Association of Science-Technology Centers, Margie became director of the North Museum in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where I helped her develop a strategic plan, an interpretive prospectus and vision document, and a plan to create in-house exhibits from the museum's collections.

Patricia "Patti" Leach was director of the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, California, when Formations worked on its displays. As director of The Hermitage in Nashville, she had Formations do an interpretive plan. I then wrote one for the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham, Washington when she became its director.

A third example is the non-profit planning and fundraising consultant Sharon Leighty. We worked together on a visitor center in eastern Oregon. Admiring her work, I recommended her to my smaller museum clients—and she reciprocated.



The author with Alan Ransenberg at the opening of the Oregon Black Pioneers' exhibit *Racing to Change*.

Exhibit design firms also asked me to join their teams. Michael Whitenack of Presentation Design Group reconnected me with the UO Museum of Natural & Cultural History, where we worked together on a new exhibit hall dedicated to Oregon's Native peoples. Alan Ransenberg brought me onto several agency and museum projects; in turn, I recommended him to small museums in need of an exhibit designer. Our work on a Lewis and Clark show at Oregon Historical Society led to a multi-year partnership with the Oregon Black Pioneers. Kelley Mlicki, an excellent Portland-based interpretive writer, joined our team in that role.

At 71, I came down with a rare blood disorder, hemolytic anemia. Treated with prednisone, I went briefly off the rails—prednisone affects about five percent of women over 70 this way. It took me almost a year to recover. Kelley Mlicki kindly and ably stepped in to handle the interpretive writing work we'd planned to do together.

An important part of my recovery was to volunteer as co-facilitator of a museum-wide strategic plan for the UO Museum of Natural & Cultural History (MNCH). The plan, co-authored with David Piercy, helped the MNCH become accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. After I recovered, I did an interpretive plan for a new natural history gallery at the museum, and was part of the team that planned and implemented a sweeping revision of the Native gallery. When I was asked to do a second edition of *Exhibit Makeovers*, it made perfect sense to engage the MNCH exhibits team as co-authors: Ann Craig, Lyle Murphy, Liz White, and Lauren Willis. It came out in 2017, published by Rowman & Littlefield under the auspices of the American Association for State and Local History. AASLH subsequently invited Ann and me to co-teach online courses and in-person workshops using the book.

My recovery notwithstanding, I realized that my writing days were over. Planning was the most interesting, most enjoyable, and least taxing part of any project for me. I continued to do interpretive and strategic planning, even after my blood disorder developed a very rare complication, cold agglutinin disease—one in 300,000 people have it. I was asymptomatic and seemed fine, but one day in the fall of 2019, I had to crawl out of bed. Every joint in my body was stiff! Welcome to 77, I thought—treatment proves elusive, but you learn to manage the symptoms. You also learn to value the good days.

I had long put off retirement because I loved my work. Despite real misgivings, I wrapped things up and let people know I was retiring. I compared notes with my brother John, who retired the same year at 72. We both found it challenging at first to invent new routines separate from the demands that outside work imposes, but we've come to appreciate the freedom from work's endless deadlines. Our timing was good—while worrisome, the pandemic and lockdown were an invitation to get our post-retirement lives organized.

In February 2021 I spent a week going through my practice files. Our family has donated memorabilia to UO's special collections; I added two boxes to those family papers. From now on, any role I take on in museum circles will be voluntary—serving on advisory boards and attending museum association meetings. As "courtesy faculty" at UO, I meet with students interested in museum work and sometimes give talks in graduate classes. Now fully vaccinated for Covid-19, I've had some face-to-face conversations and made in-person museum visits. Travel abroad may be possible at some point.

Looking back on more than 30 years as a museum consultant, it strikes me that this is not an occupation for the faint of heart. Eugene is a backwater where air travel is concerned, and I often arose at 3:30 a.m. to catch a 5:15 a.m. plane. The rigors of flying and the loneliness of anonymous hotel rooms were constants. And site visits were hard work: clients paid good money and they set the schedule. Day-long meetings, often beginning over breakfast, then dinner with clients, followed by writing up the day's notes and preparing for tomorrow. This often went on for a week.

Yet I was energized and sustained by the hospitality and excitement of the client team, the inherent fascination of the subject matter, and opportunities to experience the community and the museum from an insider perspective, even when the project didn't happen. The Cowboy Museum in Sheridan, Wyoming is an example. It never came to fruition, but I have indelible memories of being present at an old-time roundup and a ranch rodeo, and of being called "ma'am" by respectful cowboys more times than I could count.

Covid-19 shifted everything online. Museums took a big hit from the loss of visitors, but some found new ways to connect with old and sometimes entirely new communities. Their staffs and collaborators embraced the cloud and worked from home, a "hive mind" that may be hard for some to give up. Should they? It eliminates a lot of daily wear and tear. "Next" is likely to be hybrid, open-minded like my old UO business school. Museums attract creatives. While they move at culture's pace, they have the latitude to effect change. Ed Rodley will scoff at my optimism, but I think that they should and will.



The author at one of many Western Museum Association meetings.

## 8. Uncharted Waters

I began writing this book in July 2019—before Covid-19, before the quarantine and lockdowns, before Black Lives Matter burst into flame, at a time when the staffs and boards at some museums were just beginning to explore decolonization and anti-racism. Some of my pre-pandemic reflections have an antiquated feel now, however unremarkable they seemed at the time.

March 2020 brought an upsurge of Covid-19 cases and deaths. Unemployment and penury became the new reality for millions of Americans, and social and personal interaction moved online. That plus a hotly contested, divisive election meant that all fields of the arts were fighting for their very lives. Museums were no exception.

Museums as institutions became the focus of heightened critique during the pandemic, a debate that has intensified as we venture into a post-pandemic cultural scene. I've followed this with great interest. There's so much to rethink and rework. It's exciting to me to stay in touch with colleagues and aspiring museum professionals who are already engaged in this evolutionary/revolutionary effort.

From the American Alliance of Museums online newsletter, *Dispatches from the Future of Museums*, October 22, 2020:

According to the Alliance's first COVID snapshot of museum operations, one-third of museums expect to lose over 40 percent of their annual operating income this year. Forty-one percent anticipate having to reduce staff, and only two-thirds are confident they will be able to survive through 2021.

In fact, federal loans kept many museums afloat, while online and "take-out" programs catered to millions of homebound youth and adults. But for the most severe critics of museums as colonizing, racist institutions, these were mere holding actions. To get a sense of how it looks from the inside, I asked a top manager at mid-size museum for her opinion. Her response was electrifying.

Covid-19 was really difficult, she said, but museums could more or less go pick up where they left off if that was their only challenge. But the Black Lives Matter and decolonization movements pose an existential test for museums. Those that rethink their missions, values, and programs in light of the issues these movements are raising will survive to find renewed life and new audiences. Those that don't will fail. This is a Darwinian moment for the field.

Given that these movements aren't limited to the U.S., some of the world's largest museums are at risk. Alarmingly, an International Council of Museums committee, charged in 2019 with developing a new definition of "museum," disbanded after failing to agree on how to address such issues as social justice, racial equality, and climate change. Delegates from major art and anthropology museums, particularly from Europe, sought to define themselves as nonprofit institutions "in the service of society" that exhibit "the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment."

My own experience, beginning around age four and continuing through my seventh decade, suggests that museums can offer far more than "education, study, and enjoyment." I believe that museums can be, and ought to be, among our most valued and transformative community assets. Like libraries, museums offer people of all ages the freedom to explore and learn as they wish, without prerequisites or grades. Like librarians, people who work and volunteer at museums are eager to help patrons make the best use of their collections, as expressed through exhibits, programs, and research support. In turn, museums rely on people and organizations in their communities to keep collections, exhibits, programs, and research funding relevant. Unless museums stay in tune with their communities' makeup and awareness, remove barriers to universal access, and seek out staff and volunteers of all backgrounds, long-term success will be elusive, even impossible.

Anyone can use a public library at no charge, unless they're late returning a book. But most museums charge entry fees. A museum might offer excellent, community-driven programs, but the cost of admission keeps potential visitors away. Can museums move to

business models that include free admission? The coming decades are unpredictable, but a socio-economic roller-coaster is a likely scenario. A museum that's as open to and valued by the community as a public library can help anchor and facilitate inquiry, dialogue, sharing, and healing. It's much more likely to survive and thrive.

These challenges are daunting, but they're also exciting and worthwhile. In my work as a volunteer advisor to a regional history museum, I see firsthand the creativity and integrity of its staff as they respond to their challenges and contribute to needed innovations. Part of their struggle is to loosen and jettison constraints that have built up over the years. Change is never easy. It takes time and mistakes are inevitable; but how exhilarating it is when those breakthroughs finally arrive! Significant shifts spur further changes as people breathe in the new atmosphere. It's a very creative time.

To be part of this process in an organization with a mission of service to the public good is a great responsibility. It's also great fun, immersed in the unique environment of a collecting, interpreting, educating, community-sustained museum. This is one place where a sense of wonder isn't a sideline but an asset that's continually awake and in play. Openness to new voices, interpretive strategies, and imaginative experiences are perennially how a museum makes its way through uncharted territory. Existential challenges are in truth nothing new; consider how many museums have survived wars and revolutions to find new roles and purposes—and a vibrant future.

To all who sign on for this journey into the unknown, bon voyage and bon courage! It's a necessary crossing, and others have made it!



Lisa Watt's photo of the author in Rapid City, South Dakota.

## 9. Editor's Postscript

As Alice's brother, I tracked her career in and around museums anecdotally. Editing this, I found that I knew parts of it from conversations, but I also felt that something was missing. When I asked about it, Alice said she was planning a separate memoir focused on travel. I write a good deal of memoir myself, and while the "something missing" is likely to surface in hers, it won't be the only feature—my sister has led a long and interesting life!

What's missing from my perspective is some sense of why museums engaged her. Yes, as she explains, it was a logical step in her career once she realized that being a fulltime academic or a teacher didn't interest her. But across her account, there are hints about the real motivation as I see it: her immersion into worlds beyond her own.

As kids, we traveled extensively. This exposure, largely by ship and train, over four or five formative childhood years, showed us in real time the planet's remarkable diversity. Despite growing up in what was then a British crown colony, we were clear that humans came in all sizes, shapes, and colors, speaking many different languages and living in ways that reflected the nuances of climate and culture. Our parents marveled at this along with us—my father left 10,000 slides documenting what we experienced. They were anthropologists of a sort, two young moderns from the American Midwest who were open to whatever life offered them. We soaked up that legacy.

At our mother's funeral, my sister recounted how, on our way to Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, we camped overnight in a park in some small town. We were making breakfast when a local woman stormed up. "Are you carnival people?" she demanded to know. "Well, what if we are?" our mother memorably replied.

My sister's anecdotes about her museum work invariably centered on the displacements that successive waves of white settlers caused to indigenous peoples in the western United States.

While working on an exhibit at The High Desert Museum, Alice told me about the vaqueros, indigenous and mestizo workers on California ranchos who were hired to trail the first cattle herds to Oregon in the 1840s. Later that name was anglicized to "buckaroo."



The 10,000-year-old fishery at Celilo, the heart of Native life in the Pacific Northwest, submerged in 1957 by the pent-up waters of The Dalles Dam.

After researching the damming of the Columbia River and talking with those that massive infrastructure project displaced, she told me how the dams kept the salmon from running upriver, destroying a salmon-fishing culture along the river that dated back to Neolithic times. Promises were made to the Columbia River tribes before the dams' construction that went unfulfilled.

Working on the Warm Springs Museum, she told me that the Treaty of 1855 relegated two river tribes, the Warm Springs and Wascos, to the high desert where their hereditary enemies, the Northern Paiutes, had always hunted and gathered. The Paiutes, defeated in the Bannock War, were force-marched in the dead of winter to Yakima, many miles to the north. After two decades of imprisonment there, the Paiute chief asked, and were granted, the river people's permission to move to the Warm Springs reservation.

In my library is a reprint of a 19th-century account of the Modoc Wars, *Wigwam and War-path* by A.B. Meacham. Alice read it in the course of her research and recommended it to me, noting that Captain Jack, the Modoc protagonist, is the sort of tragic figure Shakespeare immortalized. The book could be the basis for a film—one rooted in a real as opposed to a whitewashed history. Black Lives Matter exemplifies how the realities of the past overtake any and all efforts to suppress their telling. Museums are one way that people absorb new truths and shift the narratives in their heads.

Museums take work. Those involved are unusually dedicated to an activity that blends art, science, technology, craft, and pedagogy. At the heart of it are motivations shared with scientists, naturalists, historians, anthropologists, archeologists, and others engaged in discovery and recovery—enabling the presence of the past in ways that animate people's imaginations and break their thinking open.

—John J. Parman, Berkeley, California, 9 August 2021

## 10. Photo Credits

Front cover: Courtesy Museum of Natural and Cultural History, University of Oregon.

Page 17: *Field Museum Bulletin*, March 1974, page 16.

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## II. About the Author



**Alice Parman** began her career at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. She spent 16 years as a museum educator and director before joining the exhibit design firm Formations Inc. as planner and writer. In 2003, she launched her own business as an interpretive and strategic planning consultant. Before retiring from active practice in 2020, she worked with museums nationwide, led exhibit development workshops for regional and national museum associations, and was a keynote speaker and presenter at museum conferences. She remains available as an advisor to selected projects.

Alice has bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Rochester and Harvard University, and a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Chicago. She is a co-author, with Ann Craig, Lyle Murphy, Liz White, and Lauren Willis, of *Exhibit Makeovers: A Do-It-Yourself Workbook for Small Museums, 2nd edition*, and with Jeffrey Jane Flowers of the 1st edition.

A longtime resident of Eugene, Oregon, Alice served on the Lane County History Museum board for three years, including two years as president, and is a member of the museum's advisory council.





